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United Nations Environment Assembly Background Guide 2026

Written by Lillian Newton and Beck Clark



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Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the 2026 National Model United Nations Washington DC Conference (NMUN•DC)! We are pleased to introduce you to your committee, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). Your committee's work is facilitated by volunteer staffers. This year's committee staff are: Director Lillian Newton and Assistant Director Beck Clark. Originally from Massachusetts, United States of America, Lillian loves to read, paint, and hike. She is excited to be serving as the Director for UNEA due to her love for nature and is looking forward to seeing how delegates engage with both topics at this year's conference. Beck grew up in California, United States of America, getting an Associate of Arts in History and Political Science. He is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. The preparation of these materials was supported by Under-Secretaries-General Kaytlyn Marcotte, Catherine Tomczyk, and Tobias Willms, and Secretary-General, Ashlee Rolheiser.

The topics on the agenda for this committee are:

1. Environmental Sustainability of Artificial Intelligence Systems
2. Strengthening Meaningful Youth Participation in Environmental Processes

UNEA is the United Nations' highest-level decision-making body pertaining to environmental issues. It sets international policy, holds forums, and monitors progress towards the 2030 Agenda. UNEA works closely with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). UNEA meets on a biannual basis and contains universal membership with all 193 recognized Member States of the United Nations. Funding comes through an allocated budget and voluntary contributions. UNEA is also headed by an elected Bureau and is governed by the President, who is responsible for committee affairs.

This Background Guide serves as an introduction to the topics for this committee. However, it is not intended to replace individual research. We encourage you to explore your Member State's policies in depth and use the bibliography to further your knowledge on these topics. In preparation for the conference, each delegation should submit a Position Paper by 11:59 p.m. ET (DC time) on 15 October 2026 in accordance with the guidelines in the [Position Paper Guide](#) and the [NMUN•DC Position Papers website](#).

Two resources, available to download from the NMUN website, serve as essential instruments in preparing for the conference and as a reference during committee sessions:

- The [NMUN Delegate Preparation Guide](#), which explains each step in the delegate process, from pre-conference research to the committee debate and resolution drafting processes. Please take note of the information on plagiarism and the prohibition on pre-written working papers and resolutions.
- The [NMUN Rules of Procedure](#), which includes the long and short form of the rules, as well as an explanatory narrative and example script of the flow of procedure.

In addition, please review the mandatory [NMUN Conduct Expectations](#) on the NMUN website. They include the conference dress code and other expectations of all attendees. We want to emphasize that any instances of sexual harassment or discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, age, or disability will not be tolerated. If you have any questions concerning your preparation for this committee, please contact Under-Secretary-General, Tobias Willms, at dcusg.tobias@nmunstaff.org or the Secretary-General, Ashlee Rolheiser, at secgen.dc@nmun.org.

We wish you all the best in your preparations and look forward to seeing you at the conference!

Lillian Newton, Director
Beck Clark, Assistant Director



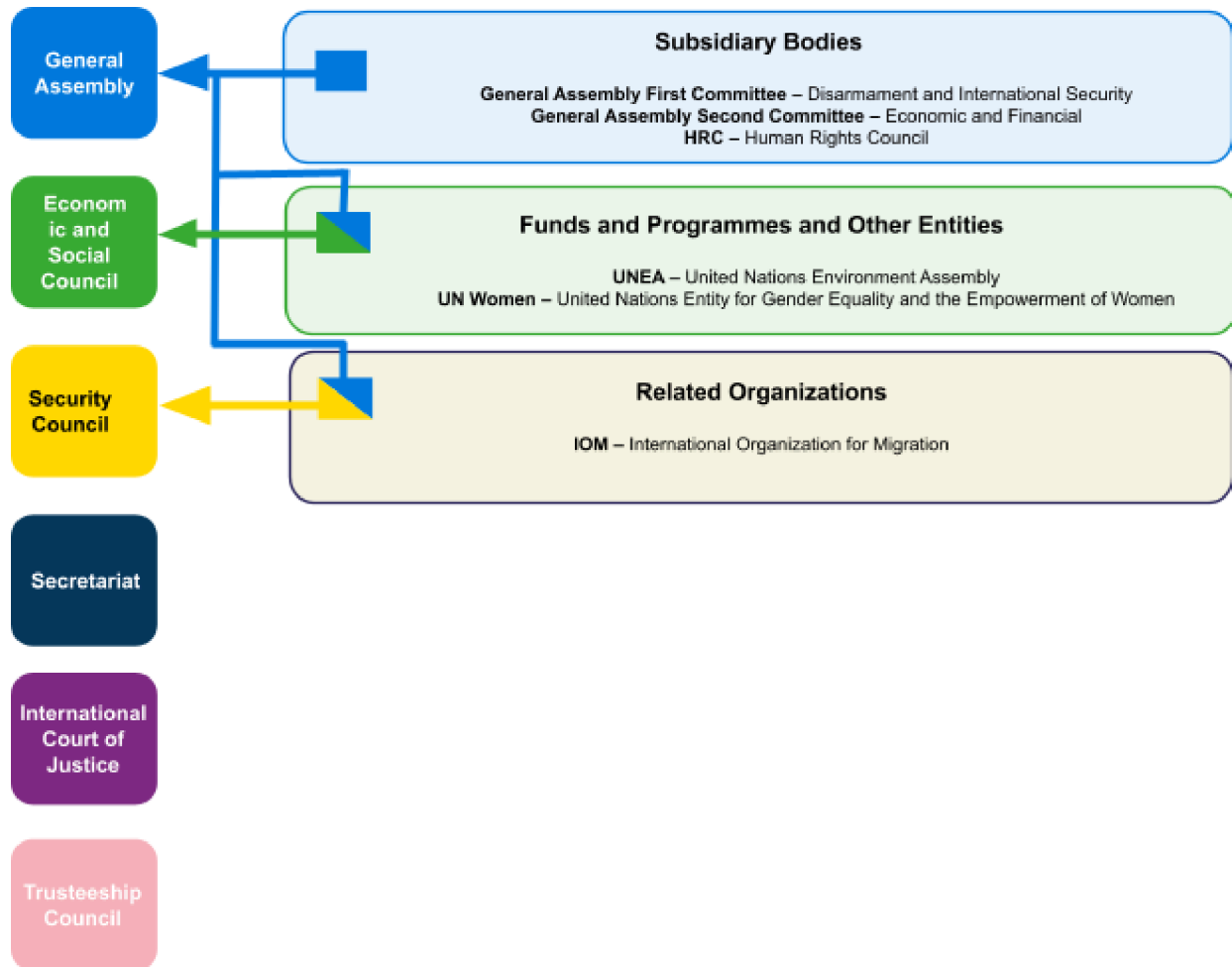
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United Nations System at NMUN•DC

This diagram illustrates the United Nations system simulated at NMUN•DC. It shows where each committee “sits” within the system to demonstrate the reportage and relationships between entities. Examine the diagram alongside the Committee Overview to gain a clear picture of the committee’s position, purpose, and powers within the United Nations system.





Committee Overview

Introduction

UNEA is the primary governing body of UNEP and the international community's highest-level decision-making body on environmental matters.¹ In partnership with other United Nations institutions, it outlines the international environmental agenda and sets priorities for the international community.² Although its resolutions are not binding, UNEA brings together relevant international actors to address global environmental issues and shape environmental governance.³

Mandate, Function and Powers

20 years after the adoption of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (1992), the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development called for the strengthening and upgrading of UNEP so that it could better execute its mandate.⁴ UNEA was created in 2012 as the successor to UNEP's Governing Council.⁵ UNEA is structured as a distinct entity and enjoys universal membership with 193 Member States.⁶ As a high-level governance body, UNEA reviews and coordinates the work of the international community on environmental matters while serving as a forum for and initiator of debates to be continued by other, more specialized bodies.⁷ UNEA adopted over 90 resolutions and 12 decisions between 2012 and 2024, with UNEA-7 last held in December 2025.⁸

While the following list is not exhaustive, the mandate of UNEA can be summarized as:

- **UNEA will generally:** set broad priorities for global environmental policy; identify emerging themes in environmental governance; progressively develop international environmental law and begin negotiations on environmental treaties; define the work and priorities of UNEP; create ad hoc committees and subsidiary bodies to further discussions on specific areas of environmental concern; make recommendations to Member States and other international organizations.⁹

¹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Q&A: UN Environment Assembly*. 2024.

⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *The future we want (A/RES/66/288)*. 2012. p. 18.

⁵ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

⁶ Ibid; Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme. *Proceedings of the Governing Council at its Nineteenth Session (UNEP/GC.19/34)*. 1997.

⁷ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.; Wagner et al. International Institute for Sustainable Development. *The United Nations Environment Assembly's Role as a Governance Architect*. 2022.

⁸ Geneva Environment Network. *Towards the 6th Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly*. 2024.

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *What you need to know about the United Nations Environment Assembly*. 2022.



- UNEA **will not generally**: engage in operational projects; complete negotiations on environmental treaties, but rather identify emerging issues and promote an architecture for future environmental governance.¹⁰

In contrast, UNEP undertakes programs, projects, and awareness campaigns and provides support to national governments to achieve environmental obligations in line with the priorities set out by UNEA.¹¹ UNEA sets the goals and policies of UNEP, while UNEP establishes and carries out the operations supporting those policies.¹² UNEP undertakes programs, projects, and other operations to achieve goals and policies in line with UNEA.¹³

Governance, Funding and Structure

All 193 United Nations Member States are represented in UNEA.¹⁴ Additionally, accredited non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may participate in sessions with the majority of rights of Member States.¹⁵ UNEA meets every two years to set priorities for global environmental policy, discuss developments in the area of environmental legislation, and assist in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 70/1 on “Transforming our world: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (2030 Agenda) (2015).¹⁶ It reports its findings, progress, and recommendations to the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).¹⁷

Consisting of ten Ministers who each serve a two-year term and are selected based on geographical rotations, UNEA's Bureau is responsible for the general conduct of business.¹⁸ It is headed by a President who serves as the main representative and figurehead of UNEA.¹⁹ The Bureau establishes meeting agendas, locations, and times, and other aspects related to administrative matters.²⁰ UNEA, through Governing Council decision 13/2 (1985), also has a Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), a subsidiary inter-sessional organ that meets at least four times a year.²¹ The CPR contributes to the preparation of UNEA's agenda, takes an advisory role in policy matters, and reviews the implementation of decisions.²² The CPR also holds discussions on key issues, promotes the inclusion of non-resident members of UNEA, and performs other tasks as assigned by UNEA.²³ It also holds quarterly subcommittee meetings throughout the year.²⁴ These meetings brief members on UNEA policy fulfillment

¹⁰ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Enhancing the role and viability of regional forums of ministers of the environment and United Nations Environment Programme regional offices in achieving multilateral cooperation in tackling environmental challenges (UNEP/EA.6/Res.3)*. 2024.

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme. *About Us*. 2026.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

¹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *Engaging with UNEA*. 2026.

¹⁶ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

¹⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *What you need to know about the United Nations Environment Assembly*. 2022.

¹⁸ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

¹⁹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About UN Environment Assembly President and Bureau*. N.d.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ United Nations Environment Programme. *About the Committee of Permanent Representatives*. 2026; United Nations Environment Programme. *Committee of Permanent Representatives*. 2026.

²² United Nations Environment Programme. *About the Committee of Permanent Representatives*. 2026.

²³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Committee of Permanent Representatives*. 2026.

²⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *About the Committee of Permanent Representatives*. 2026.



and upcoming sessions.²⁵ Consisting of all accredited Permanent Representatives to UNEP, the CPR is led by its own five-member Bureau that is elected for two years.²⁶

UNEP relies on three main financial sources: earmarked funds, the Environment Fund, and the United Nations' regular budget.²⁷ Earmarked funds, also known as earmarked contributions, are funds appropriated for specific projects, themes, or countries.²⁸ These funds aim to expand and/or replicate the results of UNEP's work in more countries and in cooperation with more partners.²⁹ The Environment Fund aids in maintaining the capacity, balance, and efficiency needed for UNEP to function.³⁰ Earmarked contributions and the Environment Fund are voluntary contributions; supplementing these are the Climate, Nature, and Pollution funds.³¹ They are also known as the Planetary Funds and serve as an alternative to earmarked funds that can be used for specific projects.³² Unlike the Environment Fund, the Planetary Funds can accept donations from outside organizations rather than just Member States.³³ 97% of UNEP's budget consists of voluntary contributions, with the last 3% being the regular budget that supports typical UNEA and UNEP operations.³⁴ As of 2026, UNEP has a total budget of \$753.6 million.³⁵

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *How is UNEP funded*. 2025.

²⁸ Ibid; United Nations Environment Programme. *Earmarked Contributions*. 2026.

²⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Earmarked Contributions*. 2026.

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *How is UNEP funded*. 2025.

³¹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Funding and Partnerships*. 2026.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.



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<https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/funding-and-partnerships/funding-facts/earmarked-contributions>



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Wagner et al. International Institute for Sustainable Development. *The United Nations Environment Assembly's Role as a Governance Architect*. 2022. Retrieved 11 May 2026 from: <https://www.iisd.org/articles/unea-governance>



1. Environmental Sustainability of Artificial Intelligence Systems

Introduction

The high demand for artificial intelligence (AI) for resources has raised environmental concerns across sectors worldwide.³⁶ While there is no universally accepted definition, AI can be understood as a collection of systems capable of intelligent behavior, such as self-learning.³⁷ By 2033, the AI market is projected to reach \$4.8 trillion as states demonstrate a continued interest in AI to develop their economies.³⁸ With new developments in AI, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and energy consumption have increased significantly, threatening to outpace renewable energy investments.³⁹

AI's environmental impact can be understood through two categories: direct effects associated with building and operating AI systems and indirect effects resulting from how AI is applied and how it influences resource management.⁴⁰ Direct effects are the immediate environmental impacts from information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as electronic waste (e-waste) production.⁴¹ E-waste consists of discarded electrical and electronic devices that can release hazardous substances.⁴² Indirect effects occur outside the ICT sector when individuals use AI in other areas, creating broader environmental benefits and harms.⁴³ When AI is applied across society, its use can improve the efficiency of energy systems or enhance climate analysis but also encourage unsustainable consumption patterns and increase fossil fuel extraction.⁴⁴

AI's development depends on a resource-intensive infrastructure that can contribute to environmental harm.⁴⁵ Constructing the hardware necessary for AI requires rare materials, which harms the environment and contributes to water pollution.⁴⁶ AI is powered by data centers, creating a global demand for energy that will be equivalent to the total electricity consumption of households in advanced economies by 2035.⁴⁷ With the demand for energy increasing, data centers require more water to cool servers, with

³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Backing environmental multilateralism in complex times*. 2026.

³⁷ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Artificial Intelligence (AI)*. N.d.

³⁸ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *AI's \$4.8 trillion future: UN Trade and Development alerts on divides, urges action*. 2025.

³⁹ International Telecommunication Union et al. *Greening Digital Companies 2024: Monitoring emissions and climate commitments*. 2024. p. 7.

⁴⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Measuring the environmental impacts of artificial intelligence compute and applications*. 2022. p. 5.

⁴¹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *Digital Economy Report 2024: Shaping an environmentally sustainable and inclusive digital future*. 2024. p. 9.

⁴² World Health Organization. *Electronic waste (e-waste)*. 2024; International Telecommunication Union. *The Global E-waste Monitor 2024*. 2024. pp. 10, 31.

⁴³ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *Digital Economy Report 2024: Shaping an environmentally sustainable and inclusive digital future*. 2024. p. 10.

⁴⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Measuring the environmental impacts of artificial intelligence compute and applications*. 2022. pp. 31-33.

⁴⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *AI has an environmental problem*. 2025.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Will AI kickstart a new age of nuclear power?*. 2026.



large centers requiring up to five million gallons per day, which equals the water usage of a town of 50,000 people.⁴⁸

Because AI can perform high-level assessments, human oversight plays a critical role in determining its environmental impacts.⁴⁹ The relationship between AI and environmental sustainability depends on how Member States balance the environmental benefits and harms of AI technologies.⁵⁰ UNEA places responsibility on Member States to facilitate environmental sustainability with human oversight guiding the development of AI systems.⁵¹ Sustainability refers to meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the quality of life of future generations.⁵² United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres emphasizes the dual nature of AI, asking for collaboration to reduce the environmental risks while highlighting its potential for predictive technologies.⁵³

When Member States are unable to participate in AI discussions, global frameworks may lack equity, transparency, and shared benefits for all.⁵⁴ On a larger scale, the Global North is ahead on AI development and implementation, creating a divide between developed and developing nations in the use of AI for energy security and efficiency.⁵⁵ In the past decade, 118 Member States, primarily from the Global South, were not represented in seven non-United Nations AI governance initiatives.⁵⁶ Member States with greater resources and access to AI technologies can shape international norms by selectively participating in and influencing AI governance initiatives.⁵⁷

International and Regional Framework

Early United Nations environmental conferences and treaties established the foundation for the international framework, indirectly governing AI by linking technological development to sustainable

⁴⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *UNEP releases guidelines to curb the environmental impact of data centres*. 2025; Yañez-Barnuevo. Environmental and Energy Study Institute. *Data Centers and Water Consumption*. 2025.

⁴⁹ Sharma. United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *UN rights chief: AI must be based on inclusivity, accountability and global standards*. 2026.

⁵⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI*. 2021. p. 35.

⁵¹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Environmental sustainability of artificial intelligence systems (UNEP/EA.7/Res.9)*. 2025. p. 2.

⁵² United Nations Environment Programme. *AI has an environmental problem*. 2025.

⁵³ Mishra. United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Humanity's fate can't be left to algorithms, UN chief tells Security Council*. 2024.

⁵⁴ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *AI's \$4.8 trillion future: UN Trade and Development alerts on divides, urges action*. 2025.

⁵⁵ United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. *On the Frontline of Climate Crisis, Worlds Most Vulnerable Nations Suffer Disproportionately*. N.d.; United Nations Environment Programme. *Navigating New Horizons: A Global Foresight Report on Planetary Health and Human Wellbeing*. 2024. p. 31.

⁵⁶ United Nations, High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence. *Governing AI for Humanity*. 2024. p. 9; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *AI's \$4.8 trillion future: UN Trade and Development alerts on divides, urges action*. 2025.

⁵⁷ United Nations, High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence. *Governing AI for Humanity*. 2024. p. 42.



development and environmental protection.⁵⁸ In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development adopted the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (Rio Declaration), creating a precedent for sets of principles that set out goals for sustainable development.⁵⁹ While the modern perception of AI did not exist at the time, the Rio Declaration calls for developed states to conduct sustainable practices when industrializing and enhancing technology.⁶⁰ In 2010, the Conference of the Parties under the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) (1992) further connected technology to environmental governance, recognizing their ability to address climate change.⁶¹ The Technology Mechanism was developed under the UNFCCC framework to advance climate technologies, which are innovations that mitigate climate change, reduce GHG, and reverse the adverse effects of climate change.⁶² The Technology Mechanism recommends inclusive policies for climate technologies, which would eventually include AI, to help facilitate the transfer of technology to developing countries.⁶³ Articles 1 and 16 of the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (1992) stress that Member States should fairly share the benefits of technology, such as AI, while ensuring that biodiversity and the environment in general are protected in consideration of AI's potential harms.⁶⁴

The 2030 Agenda builds on the principles of the Rio Declaration by promoting measurable sustainability goals that support coexistence between nature and humanity.⁶⁵ Of these, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 (responsible consumption and production) focuses on unsustainable consumption and production patterns to ensure that humanity's economic growth from AI does not come at the cost of environmental degradation.⁶⁶ SDG target 12.4 promotes responsible waste management, such as e-waste, to minimize the impact on human health and the environment.⁶⁷ Additionally, SDG 13 (climate action) directly addresses the immediate impacts of climate change, noting how human-induced actions can both exacerbate and mitigate effects on the environment.⁶⁸ AI has the potential to support climate mitigation and adaptation if its energy and water demands are managed responsibly.⁶⁹

Written by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI* (2021) presents guidance for the implementation of AI technology, emphasizing how interconnected AI is to socio-economic justice, development, and environmental

⁵⁸ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992*. N.d.

⁵⁹ Zukang. United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Objectives and Vision for Rio+20*. 2012.

⁶⁰ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992*. N.d.

⁶¹ Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its sixteenth session, held in Cancun from 29 November to 10 December 2010 (FCCC/CP/2010/7)*. 2010. pp. 27-29.

⁶² United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Technology Mechanism*. 2015. p. 2.

⁶³ Ibid. pp. 5-6.

⁶⁴ Conference for the Adoption of the Agreed Text of the Convention on Biological Diversity. *Convention on Biological Diversity*. 2011. Art. 1, 16.

⁶⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. pp. 3-4.

⁶⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns*. N.d.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*. N.d.

⁶⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *AI has an environmental problem*. 2025.



systems.⁷⁰ UNESCO recognizes that AI can potentially help achieve the SDGs but only if Member States address the benefits and harms created throughout the AI lifecycle.⁷¹ Specifically, policy area five of the recommendation is dedicated to the environment and ecosystems, asking Member States to promote sustainable data infrastructure and AI systems that reduce harmful direct and indirect environmental impacts, including their carbon footprint, energy consumption, data infrastructure, and raw material extraction.⁷² These recommendations frame AI as a tool for environmental protection and should be managed so as not to worsen existing inequalities.⁷³

Recent United Nations initiatives have established broader international frameworks for sustainable AI and environmental protections.⁷⁴ The 2024 *Global Digital Compact* provides a framework for digital cooperation and for aligning AI governance with the SDGs.⁷⁵ To advance its implementation, the Global Dialogue on AI Governance provides a United Nations platform for Member States and stakeholders to discuss the risks, benefits, and capacity gaps related to AI.⁷⁶ In the same year, the General Assembly adopted resolution 78/311 on “Enhancing international cooperation on capacity-building of artificial intelligence” to increase developing countries’ access to AI technology to advance the SDGs.⁷⁷ The resolution seeks to improve AI-related infrastructure, knowledge-sharing systems, and governance support in developing nations.⁷⁸ The seventh session of UNEA was held in December 2025 and encouraged the use of AI to protect the environment in its resolution 7/9 on “Environmental sustainability of artificial intelligence systems,” through which it created a shared international basis for discussing sustainable AI in an issue-specific framework.⁷⁹

AI sustainability depends on strong regional and local partnerships connecting different actors to create practical and sustainable frameworks.⁸⁰ One of the first regional multilateral conventions on AI is the Council of Europe’s *Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law* (2024).⁸¹ The convention requires states to address the risks of AI through safeguards and impact assessments, ensuring AI systems account for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.⁸² The African Union’s (AU’s) *Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy* (2024) frames AI as a tool for achieving the Union’s Agenda 2063 for socioeconomic transformation from 2013 to 2063 and the SDGs.⁸³ The document focuses on improving AI access in local communities to address challenges concerning climate

⁷⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI*. 2021. p. 5.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 21.

⁷² Ibid. p. 30.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *Backing environmental multilateralism in complex times*. 2026.

⁷⁵ United Nations, Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies. *Global Digital Compact*. N.d.

⁷⁶ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *UN Calls for Inputs to Global Dialogue on AI Governance*. 2026.

⁷⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *Enhancing international cooperation on capacity-building of artificial intelligence (A/RES/78/311)*. 2024. p. 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 3.

⁷⁹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Environmental sustainability of artificial intelligence systems (UNEP/EA.7/Res.9)*. 2025. p. 2.

⁸⁰ United Nations Development Programme. *The choice of sustainable development in the age of AI*. 2025.

⁸¹ Council Of Europe. *The Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence*. 2024.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ African Union. *Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy*. 2024. p. 1.



adaptation, agriculture, energy, and environmental protection.⁸⁴ Additionally, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) helped to facilitate the Hamburg Sustainability Conference, bringing together private-sector participants and government representatives based on their capacity to contribute to implementation efforts.⁸⁵ The *Hamburg Declaration on Responsible AI* (Hamburg Declaration) (2025) was adopted at the conference to address the negative impact of AI on the environment without safeguards, proposing a renewed commitment to the SDGs to advance AI responsibility.⁸⁶

Role of the International System

UNEA is the highest-level decision-making body unique in viewing AI as an issue concerning environmental governance rather than only as a development tool.⁸⁷ In 2024, UNEA's sixth session outlined the global environmental agenda for emerging technologies in a ministerial declaration, committing to inclusive, equitable, and sustainable uses of ICTs.⁸⁸ Resolution 6/5 on "Environmental aspects of minerals and metals" (2024) was an extension of the declaration, with Member States calling for mutual cooperation to strengthen policy on the management of environmental aspects of minerals and metals, resources used in AI hardware, promoting responsible extraction.⁸⁹ In its seventh session held in December 2025, UNEA adopted resolution 7/9 entitled "Environmental sustainability of artificial intelligence systems," the first international resolution on AI and the environment, committing to harnessing AI for sustainability and highlighting the benefits AI can bring.⁹⁰ The resolution encourages Member States to improve environmental data quality, accessibility, and interoperability, which refers to the ability of systems to work with other products, by improving environmental data systems at the national level through partnerships between Member States.⁹¹

UNEP often works with United Nations agencies, initiatives, and partners to directly advance environmental sustainability efforts through guidance and implementation tools.⁹² UNEP published the report *Artificial Intelligence (AI) End-to-End* in 2024, describing how AI can support climate action and pollution prevention while also emphasizing that AI systems must be assessed across their full lifecycle because their use can increase energy demand, mineral extraction, water consumption, and e-waste.⁹³ In

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 28.

⁸⁵ United Nations Development Programme. *Hamburg Declaration on Responsible AI: Global leaders commit to responsible AI for sustainable development*. 2025; Hamburg Sustainability Conference. *List of Selected Confirmed Participants*. 2025. pp. 1-10.

⁸⁶ United Nations Development Programme. *Hamburg Declaration on Responsible Artificial Intelligence*. 2025. p. 2.

⁸⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *AI has an environmental problem*. 2025.

⁸⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *Draft ministerial declaration of the United Nations Environment Assembly at its sixth session: "Effective, inclusive, and sustainable multilateral actions to tackle climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution"*. 2024.

⁸⁹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Environmental aspects of minerals and metals* (UNEP/EA.6/Res.5). 2024. pp. 1-2.

⁹⁰ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Environmental sustainability of artificial intelligence systems* (UNEP/EA.7/Res.9). 2025. p. 2; Coalition for Sustainable AI. *December 12 – Adoption of a first multilateral resolution on AI and the environment at UNEA-7*. 2025.

⁹¹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Environmental sustainability of artificial intelligence systems* (UNEP/EA.7/Res.9). 2025. p. 2.

⁹² United Nations Environment Assembly. *Fostering National action to address global environments, challenges through increased cooperation between the United Nations Environment Assembly, the United Nations Environment Programme and multilateral environmental agreements* (UNEP/EA.6/Res.6). 2024. p. 2.

⁹³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Artificial intelligence (AI) end-to-end*. 2024. p. 3.



2025, the International Methane Emissions Observatory and UNEP released the *Sustainable Procurement Guidelines for Data Centres and Servers*, which provide recommendations for improving the energy efficiency and environmental performance of data center infrastructure.⁹⁴ Due to the operational capacity of the World Food Programme (WFP), UNEP contributed environmental science and policy expertise to WFP collectively focusing on environmental sustainability efforts concerning food security, water security, and sustainable agriculture.⁹⁵ WFP also published the *Global Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025-2027* (2025), using UNEP's sustainability efforts as guidelines for resource optimization and responsible technology use.⁹⁶

The General Assembly defines shared priorities on emerging technologies and on integrating AI policy into existing frameworks.⁹⁷ To close the digital divide between developed and developing nations, General Assembly resolution 78/265 entitled "Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development" advocates for AI systems in consideration of Member States' unique needs and capacities.⁹⁸ Under the General Assembly, UNDP heads the AI Hub for Sustainable Development to implement AI ecosystems within Africa, stressing that adverse environmental impacts, like the energy required for running large-scale AI systems, result from the unmanaged use of AI's computing infrastructure.⁹⁹

UNESCO opened dialogue on AI through its *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI* in 2021 and committed to sustainability reporting that provides transparency on the organization's environmental footprint.¹⁰⁰ The resulting reports highlight UNESCO's commitment to energy-efficient technologies and note that the organization is ahead of schedule for the 2030 targets for facility emissions.¹⁰¹ UNESCO's Ad Hoc Expert Group on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence addresses complex ethical issues regarding AI and the environment.¹⁰² The Organisation also created the Readiness Assessment Methodology to determine the capacities of a Member State with regard to the implementation of an AI system.¹⁰³ Building on this methodology, UNESCO's Ethical Impact Assessment can be used to recognize the potential positive and negative outcomes of a specific AI system, such as the effects of energy requirement on emissions in

⁹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *How to make AI data centres more sustainable*. 2026; United Nations Environment Programme. *UNEP releases guidelines to curb the environmental impact of data centres*. 2025.

⁹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *WFP and UNEP bolster global food and water security*. 2023.

⁹⁶ World Food Programme. *WFP Global Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025-2027*. 2025. p. 31.

⁹⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *Information and communication technologies for sustainable development (A/RES/78/132)*. 2023. pp. 8,15.

⁹⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development (A/RES/78/265)*. 2024. p. 4.

⁹⁹ United Nations Development Programme. *AI Hub for Sustainable Development: Strengthening Local AI Ecosystems through Collective Action*. 2024. pp. 9, 35-36.

¹⁰⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *UNESCO's Environmental Commitment and Policy*. N.d.

¹⁰¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *UNESCO Environmental Sustainability Report 2025*. 2025. p. 2.

¹⁰² United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. *Input to the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. 2020. p. 3.

¹⁰³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Readiness assessment methodology: a tool of the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. 2023. p. 5; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Ethical impact assessment: a tool of the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. 2023. p. 8.



affected communities.¹⁰⁴ The Philippines' AI readiness score aided its still-evolving *National AI Strategy* in finding gaps in policies addressing AI's impact on the environment and sustainability, although it was already using AI in dealing with natural hazards and disasters.¹⁰⁵

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is an autonomous specialized agency that brings together 194 Member States, companies, universities, and other organizations to share information and provide a multilateral platform for ICTs.¹⁰⁶ AI is a part of the broader ICT ecosystem with the ITU's AI for Good platform working with different actors to identify new emerging trends as AI evolves to potentially help meet the SDGs.¹⁰⁷ To address climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and ecosystem protection, UNEP and ITU co-lead the 2026 Coalition for Environmentally Sustainable AI, which launched the Resilient AI Challenge to find the most energy-efficient model of AI, the winner of which will be announced in July 2026 at the AI for Good Summit in Geneva.¹⁰⁸

At the regional level, the AU and United Nations bodies in Latin America have made strides in AI environmental sustainability.¹⁰⁹ The AU's *Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy* emphasizes how sustainability is linked to infrastructure, creating regional coordination on efficient standards and power sourcing.¹¹⁰ The Union plans to build green data centres to meet environmental and sustainability standards.¹¹¹ As a collaborative initiative between Latin American Member States and UNESCO, the Business Council for Ethics of AI provides a space for private-sector dialogue based on sustainable development.¹¹² Additionally, the AI for Amazon deforestation monitoring model created by UNDP and a Brazilian research institute informs public policy and supports law enforcement in protecting the Amazon rainforest.¹¹³

Advancing Responsible E-Waste Management

With the expansion of AI, the proliferation of data centers creates risks of unmanageable rates of e-waste harming the environment, but existing data gaps make it difficult to assess the extent of its environmental impact.¹¹⁴ Electricity demand for AI data centers is expected to double by 2030.¹¹⁵ UNEP notes that the

¹⁰⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Ethical impact assessment: a tool of the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. 2023. p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *PHILIPPINES Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment Report*. 2025. pp. 10-11, 26.

¹⁰⁶ International Telecommunication Union. *About The International Telecommunication Union (ITU)*. 2026.

¹⁰⁷ International Telecommunication Union. *Artificial intelligence for good*. 2023; AI for Good. *About Us*. 2026.

¹⁰⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *New Coalition aims to put Artificial Intelligence on a more sustainable path*. 2025; Coalition for Sustainable AI. *Resilient AI Challenge*. 2026.

¹⁰⁹ African Union. *Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy*. 2024. pp. 4, 21; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *The UNESCO Business Council for the Ethics of AI was officially launched*. 2023.

¹¹⁰ African Union. *Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy*. 2024. pp. 4, 22.

¹¹¹ Ibid. pp. 45-46.

¹¹² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *The UNESCO Business Council for the Ethics of AI was officially launched*. 2023.

¹¹³ Lebdioui et al. United Nations Development Programme. *AI, Biodiversity and Energy in Latin America and the Caribbean: From a Resource Intensive to Symbiotic Tech*. 2025. pp. 9, 11.

¹¹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *AI has an environmental problem*. 2025.

¹¹⁵ Ibid; International Energy Agency. *AI is set to drive surging electricity demand from data centres while offering the potential to transform how the energy sector works*. 2025.



high volume of e-waste generated correlates with the increasing demand for energy in data centers.¹¹⁶ In addition to electricity demands, the water used to cool data centres and produce energy is equivalent to the basic annual domestic needs of 1.3 billion people by the end of the decade.¹¹⁷ To keep data centres operating comes at the expense of exacerbating climate change, biodiversity loss, as well as pollution and waste.¹¹⁸ With data centres typically located in urban areas, harmful substances contained in e-waste threaten local air quality.¹¹⁹ The World Health Organization (WHO) stresses that up to 1,000 different harmful substances, such as lead and mercury, can travel across borders by air, soil, dust, and water into the environment.¹²⁰ With this in mind, the Hamburg Declaration calls for the proportional development of AI in accordance with its environmental impact, aligning with sustainability goals for the climate.¹²¹

Without proper extraction techniques, environmental harm becomes a human health issue as hazardous materials from e-waste are released into the atmosphere.¹²² When the hardware components of AI systems are burned, put in landfills, or dumped, they release harmful chemicals which pollute the environment and harm human health.¹²³ Children and pregnant women are disproportionately at risk when informal employment as waste pickers exposes them to contaminated air, water, soil, and dust, spreading toxic substances through their clothing and food.¹²⁴ The toxic chemicals can contaminate breast milk, impacting a child's developing respiratory, immune, and nervous systems.¹²⁵ The adverse effects of e-waste on the environment will continue to extend to human health as e-waste is being produced five times faster than its recycling rate.¹²⁶ In 2025, UNEA reported that the costs of poor waste management systems to human health and the environment reach up to \$78 billion annually.¹²⁷

UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI* outlines the responsibility of Member States to abide by environmental law, policies, and practices to address the environmental impacts of AI systems and data infrastructures.¹²⁸ Member States play a vital role in monitoring the implementation of such actions to mitigate the direct and indirect impacts of AI systems, such as e-waste.¹²⁹ As Member States adopt measures to combat e-waste, many lack the documentation, mechanisms, management, and capacity to make them effective.¹³⁰ According to ITU, 81 Member States had adopted e-waste policies, legislation, or

¹¹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Artificial intelligence (AI) end-to-end*. 2024. p. 3.

¹¹⁷ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *AI's environmental costs threaten water, land and climate*. 2026.

¹¹⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *How to make AI data centres more sustainable*. 2026.

¹¹⁹ United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe, Group of Experts on Energy Efficiency. *Intersection between large-scale digitalization and environmental sustainability: an overview of use and impact of data centres (GEEE-12/2025/INF.2)*. 2025. p. 8; United Nations Environment Management Group. *United Nations System-wide Response to Tackling E-waste*. 2017. pp. 15-16.

¹²⁰ World Health Organization. *Electronic waste (e-waste)*. 2024.

¹²¹ United Nations Development Programme. *Hamburg Declaration on Responsible Artificial Intelligence*. 2025. p. 4.

¹²² International Telecommunication Union. *The Global E-waste Monitor 2024*. 2024. p. 27.

¹²³ World Health Organization. *Electronic waste (e-waste)*. 2024.

¹²⁴ United Nations Children's Fund et al. *Children and E-waste: Key Messages*. 2022. p. 2.

¹²⁵ World Health Organization. *Electronic waste (e-waste)*. 2024.

¹²⁶ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *World News in Brief: Global trade rebound forecast, e-waste mountain grows, 7,000 preventable TB deaths in Europe during COVID-19*. 2024.

¹²⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *As electronic waste surges, countries look for answers*. 2025.

¹²⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI*. 2021. p. 30.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ International Telecommunication Union. *The Global E-waste Monitor 2024*. 2024. p. 15.



regulations as of 2024.¹³¹ ITU explains that the development of e-waste management frameworks requires addressing who pays for the exorbitant costs, which level of government is responsible, clear documented procedures, and the degree of public-private partnerships.¹³²

There are various bodies, programs, and actors in the international system that work to achieve related goals, such as measuring and reducing the amount of e-waste produced in accordance with United Nations frameworks.¹³³ ITU has gone on to organize the Global E-waste Monitor in partnership with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), thus providing comprehensive research on e-waste management to identify gaps in e-waste policy.¹³⁴ Broad regional research is gathered before shortening the scope to state-level cases, allowing policymakers to compare regional and state-wide trends.¹³⁵ UNESCO's *AI for Environment and Ecosystems Toolkit for Policymakers* is a guide that connects e-waste to ethics, governance, and national AI strategies.¹³⁶ Alternatively, WHO's Initiative on E-waste and Child Health raises awareness and provides support to Member States regarding the sustainable disposal of e-waste.¹³⁷ By focusing on the design of AI hardware, UNEP works towards using critical minerals more efficiently, holding producers responsible for AI's entire lifecycle.¹³⁸ Developing countries are provided further assistance through UNEP's International Environmental Technology Centre, which supports waste management and prevention methods.¹³⁹

Harnessing AI to Advance Sustainability

Digital technologies, such as AI, directly influence 103 of the 169 SDG targets, thus presenting an opportunity to work towards positive outcomes for the planet.¹⁴⁰ The immense computational power of AI could allow it to aid in climate action, nature protection, and pollution prevention.¹⁴¹ AI presents an opportunity to optimize manufacturing processes with real-time monitoring to find inefficiencies and to recommend corrective actions leading to lower energy consumption and emissions.¹⁴² Farmers can use AI's pattern recognition skills to analyze soil conditions and weather patterns, thereby determining the optimal use of water, fertilizer, and pesticides.¹⁴³ AI smart sensors reduce water usage and environmental degradation by actively controlling energy and water use and adapting to changing conditions.¹⁴⁴

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² International Telecommunication Union. *Policy practices for e-waste management*. 2025. p. 15.

¹³³ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *UN System*. N.d.

¹³⁴ International Telecommunication Union. *The Global E-waste Monitor 2024*. 2024. pp. 2, 24.

¹³⁵ Ibid. pp. 64-106.

¹³⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *AI for Environment and Ecosystems Toolkit for Policymakers*. 2025.

¹³⁷ World Health Organization. *WHO Initiative on E-waste and Child Health*. 2021. pp. 4, 15.

¹³⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *Circularity – accelerating sustainable consumption and production: UNEP's reflections*. 2025.

¹³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Beat Waste Pollution*. N.d.

¹⁴⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Digitalization for Sustainability*. 2026.

¹⁴¹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Artificial intelligence (AI) end-to-end*. 2024. p. 2.

¹⁴² International Telecommunication Union. *AI and the Environment - International Standards for AI and the Environment*. 2024. p. 5.

¹⁴³ Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency. *Circular Economy and Digitalization - Working Paper*. 2025. p. 5.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 6; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *Leveraging AI for productivity and workers empowerment*. 2025. p. 36.



Developing Member States face barriers hindering their access to AI, thereby halting global advancement on environmental sustainability.¹⁴⁵ One-third of the global population lacks access to the Internet, presenting a digital gap in how the international community manages rapidly evolving digital technologies.¹⁴⁶ Developing countries need water management systems the most, with 1.2 billion people living in agricultural areas with high levels of water stress.¹⁴⁷ After acquiring technology, strong governance systems are still needed to guide national policies that ensure environmentally sustainable AI.¹⁴⁸

Various bodies have looked towards collective action with regard to sharing resources to improve trust in AI systems.¹⁴⁹ Collective action requires a joint effort to promote a shared understanding of AI, allowing AI's benefits to reach the Global South equitably.¹⁵⁰ The AI Hub for Sustainable Development connects developers in Cameroon, Ghana, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania to global AI talent, centering its efforts on priorities related to human and planetary health.¹⁵¹ To optimize resources, WFP's *Global Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025-2027* outlines the integration of AI into humanitarian operations, with HungerMap Live supporting real-time food-security monitoring.¹⁵² The plan aims to experiment, in a secure environment, with energy-efficient AI technologies to find AI-driven solutions.¹⁵³

AI governance is connected with sustainability under UNEA's environmental agenda, which supports partnerships that address AI's environmental footprint.¹⁵⁴ At the 2025 AI Action Summit in Paris, UNEP worked with the ITU to implement the Coalition for Sustainable AI, which promotes sustainable AI initiatives.¹⁵⁵ The Coalition also focuses on bringing together a diverse set of actors to create a platform to advance environmental goals and a hub for sharing existing best practices.¹⁵⁶ For example, participants of the Water Scarcity Hackathon had to use AI to determine efficient uses of water flow and water allocation.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, the Green Digital Action Working Group on Sustainable AI works to standardize measurements of AI's environmental impact across Member States and companies.¹⁵⁸

¹⁴⁵ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *AI for Good Summit: Digital and technological divide is no longer acceptable*. 2024.

¹⁴⁶ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *At UN, nations pledge people-first digital future, tighter AI safeguards*. 2025.

¹⁴⁷ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *Leveraging AI for productivity and workers empowerment*. 2025. p. 50.

¹⁴⁸ United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe. *Artificial intelligence: How much energy does AI use?*. 2025.

¹⁴⁹ United Nations Development Programme. *AI Hub for Sustainable Development: Strengthening Local AI Ecosystems through Collective Action*. 2024. p. 23.

¹⁵⁰ United Nations Development Programme. *Global collective action platform for Responsible AI for Sustainable Development initiated by UN Development Programme and Germany's Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development*. 2024.

¹⁵¹ United Nations Development Programme. *AI Hub for Sustainable Development: Strengthening Local AI Ecosystems through Collective Action*. 2024. p. 13.

¹⁵² World Food Programme. *WFP Global Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025-2027*. 2025. pp. 5-6.

¹⁵³ Ibid. pp. 14, 16.

¹⁵⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *The Report of the Executive Director to UNEA-7*. 2025.

¹⁵⁵ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *Paris Summit Launches Coalition for Sustainable AI*. 2025.

¹⁵⁶ Artificial intelligence Action Summit. *Coalition for Sustainable AI*. N.d. pp. 4-5.

¹⁵⁷ Coalition for Sustainable AI. *Sustainable AI Hackathons and Challenges*. 2026.

¹⁵⁸ Coalition for Sustainable AI. *International Green AI initiatives*. 2026.



Conclusion

In discussions of AI and its relationship to environmental sustainability, it is essential to recognize potential harms and room for innovation.¹⁵⁹ AI's growing demand within the international community has led to the development of various frameworks directly connecting AI governance to environmental sustainability.¹⁶⁰ However, AI systems rely on raw materials, particularly metals, while gaps in responsible e-waste management persist.¹⁶¹ Breakthroughs in research demonstrate the potential of AI to aid sustainability efforts when guided by human oversight, international cooperation, and equitable access.¹⁶² AI has the potential to significantly shape future sustainable development, but its broader social and environmental effects require further cooperation to ensure its sustainable implementation.¹⁶³

Further Research

As delegates conduct further research and consider how to address this topic, they should consider: How does your Member State's access to AI shape its environmental footprint? As AI continues to evolve, how can Member States address any unpredicted adverse effects? What national laws, regulations, or policies act as environmental protection against AI in your Member State, and are there any enforcement gaps? To what extent is your Member State involved in AI governance discussions, and what reforms would your delegation support to allow for wider representation in sustainability discussions? Which international or regional organizations could your Member State use to advance AI development and environmental safeguards, and what role should UNEA play in coordinating them?

¹⁵⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Navigating New Horizons: A Global Foresight Report on Planetary Health and Human Wellbeing*. 2024. p. 32.

¹⁶⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Artificial intelligence (AI) end-to-end*. 2024. p. 3.

¹⁶¹ United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe. *Artificial intelligence: How much energy does AI use?*. 2025.

¹⁶² International Telecommunication Union. *Artificial intelligence for good*. 2023.

¹⁶³ International Telecommunication Union. *AI and the Environment - International Standards for AI and the Environment*. 2024. p. 17.



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https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-08/bp_41_ai_biodiversity_energy.pdf

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2. Strengthening Meaningful Youth Participation in Environmental Processes

“Humanity depends on the boundless energy, ideas and contributions of youth everywhere. Today and every day, let’s support and stand with young people in shaping a just and sustainable world, for people and planet.”¹⁶⁴

Introduction

Youth growing up in the current international community are set to bear the highest ecological and economic consequences of ongoing environmental crises while contributing the least to the human behavior that has led to or exacerbated these issues.¹⁶⁵ As noted in the report *Charting a youth vision for a just and sustainable future* (2022), researchers believe an individual born in 2020, as compared to an individual born in 1960, will experience double the number of wildfires and nearly seven times as many heatwaves within their lifetime.¹⁶⁶ Youth in the 21st century are directly impacted by a phenomenon known as the triple planetary crisis, a set of overlapping environmental problems, namely biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution, which disrupts the sectors and systems young individuals depend on, from agriculture and education to health and security concerns.¹⁶⁷

The concept of youth as a population group remains relatively broad but does have some definitional foundation within the United Nations.¹⁶⁸ While there is no singular agreed-upon definition, a 1981 report of the Secretary-General titled *International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace* (A/36/215) defines youth as ages 15 to 24 for statistical purposes.¹⁶⁹ Current estimates by the United Nations indicate there are 1.2 billion people between the ages of 15 and 24, equating to 16% of the total global population; this number is expected to rise to 1.3 billion people by 2030.¹⁷⁰

Young people, aging alongside the rise of climate change and other environmental issues, are in an important position to provide targeted insight and ideas for solutions.¹⁷¹ Current youth are historically among the most active generations involved in environmental activism, with many young individuals engaging with environmental issues through means such as advocacy, engaging decision-makers within their home states and abroad, and contributing directly to ongoing programs.¹⁷² Youth are also especially

¹⁶⁴ United Nations Sustainable Development Group. *UN Secretary-General’s Message on International Youth Day*. 2023.

¹⁶⁵ Plush et al. United Nations Children’s Fund. *Making Climate and Environment Policies for & with Children and Young People*. 2021. pp. 1-2.

¹⁶⁶ Aggarwal et al. Stockholm Environment Institute et al. *Charting a youth vision for a just and sustainable future*. 2022. pp. 10, 19-21; Perera. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. *Multiple threats to child health from fossil fuel combustion: Impacts of air pollution and climate change*. 2017. pp. 141-148; Ryan et al. Save the Children. *Born into the Climate Crisis: Why we must act now to secure children’s rights*. 2021.

¹⁶⁷ Geneva Environment Network. *Youth and the Environment*. 2025; United Nations Children’s Fund. *Climate change and environment*. N.d.; United Nations Children’s Fund. *Healthy environments for healthy children*. N.d.

¹⁶⁸ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth*. N.d.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid; United Nations, General Assembly. *International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace - Report of the Secretary-General (A/36/215)*. 1981. p. 15.

¹⁷⁰ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth*. N.d.

¹⁷¹ United Nations Children’s Fund. *Climate change and environment*. N.d.

¹⁷² Geneva Environment Network. *Youth and the Environment*. 2025; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth in Action*. N.d.; World Wildlife Fund. *The Value of Youth Voices in Conservation*. 2024.



equipped to be able to apply modern technologies and innovation to environmental problems, utilizing resources such as digital tools and social networks to enable increased participation and problem-solving.¹⁷³ Research shows that youth participation of all types helps create individuals with stronger decision-making and civic capabilities, capable of promoting positive eco-change for their communities.¹⁷⁴

Nevertheless, youth face barriers to effectively engage in environmental processes.¹⁷⁵ Youth may face discrimination based upon age, making it difficult to guarantee their voices and perspectives are taken seriously in environmental dialogue and work.¹⁷⁶ This may include the belief that youth lack the degree of knowledge or experience necessary to contribute meaningfully or that youth must earn the ability to contribute in discussions.¹⁷⁷ According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), when young people are allowed to engage, their inclusion is often superficial or primarily for show.¹⁷⁸ In turn, according to the Geneva Environment Network, effective participation starts with educating youth on environmental issues and ensuring the group has the ability and access to fully contribute to related processes and decision-making efforts.¹⁷⁹

International and Regional Framework

Rights-affirming frameworks, most importantly the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) (1989), provide legal standards for youth engagement.¹⁸⁰ Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention detail children's right to form opinions and to express their own independently formed perspectives.¹⁸¹ Although the former articles do not explicitly mention environmental processes, Article 29 directs Member States to educate children in "respect for the natural environment."¹⁸² While the CRC defines children as individuals under the age of 18 and does not refer specifically to youth, the overlap with practical definitions of youth makes these rights key to related discussions.¹⁸³ More recently, the Committee on the Rights of the Child's *General comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change* (General Comment No. 26) (2023) addressed the intersection between children's rights as enshrined in the CRC and environmental affairs.¹⁸⁴ The framework focuses on how Member States and the international community need to simultaneously protect children's environmental rights while also involving children in related processes and discussions.¹⁸⁵ While focusing primarily on climate change, General Comment No. 26 notes its insights can, and should, be applied to a wider range of global environmental issues.¹⁸⁶

¹⁷³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Five ways in which education is driving environmental action*. 2026; United Nations Children's Fund. *Child and Youth Action for the Environment*. N.d.

¹⁷⁴ United Nations Children's Fund. *Why participation matters*. N.d.

¹⁷⁵ Geneva Environment Network. *Youth and the Environment*. 2025.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ United Nations Children's Fund. *Why participation matters*. N.d.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Geneva Environment Network. *Youth and the Environment*. 2025.

¹⁸⁰ United Nations Children's Fund. *Why participation matters*. N.d.; United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Rights of the Child (A/RES/44/25)*. 1989.

¹⁸¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Rights of the Child (A/RES/44/25)*. 1989. p. 168.

¹⁸² Ibid. p. 170.

¹⁸³ Ibid. p. 167; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth*. N.d.

¹⁸⁴ United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child. *General comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change (CRC/C/GC/26)*. 2023.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 1.



Frameworks, including the 1992 *Agenda 21*, the 1996 *World Programme of Action for Youth* (WPAY), and eventually the 2030 Agenda, have increasingly emphasized youth involvement in several priority areas of environmental matters.¹⁸⁷ *Agenda 21* highlights youth and children as one major group involved in safeguarding nature and development activities and lists objectives for state governments and the United Nations system to increase the group's institutional involvement in environmental processes and related education.¹⁸⁸ In addition to *Agenda 21*, two priority areas of WPAY advance progress on youth participation in environmental processes: priority area 5 titled "environment" and priority area 10 titled "Full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making."¹⁸⁹ *Agenda 21*'s multilateral environmental plan of action additionally played a significant role in the creation of subsequent frameworks, including many of the SDGs declared under the 2030 Agenda.¹⁹⁰

Over the last decade, frameworks have increasingly centered around youth participation in sustainability and environmental processes, highlighting the group as important players in global ecological issues and focusing on youth as central contributors to achieve related sustainability goals.¹⁹¹ Introduced in the 2030 Agenda, many of the 17 SDGs reflect this idea.¹⁹² Under SDG 4 (quality education), target 4.7 aims to ensure all "learners" are educated on sustainable development, building related skills and promoting individuals' engagement with international issues.¹⁹³ SDG target 13.b notes youth as a critical group regarding capacity-building.¹⁹⁴ In 2018, Secretary-General António Guterres launched *Youth 2030: The United Nations Youth Strategy*, detailing how the United Nations system can better meet youth needs while utilizing their expertise and will for action.¹⁹⁵ While the document does not explicitly mention the environment, it does highlight youth action regarding sustainable development and the SDGs.¹⁹⁶ In 2021, UNICEF's *Healthy Environment for Healthy Children: Global Programme Framework* described children, especially girls, as advocates and noted states have two main obligations to youth: inclusion in environmentally related discussions and mindfulness of their needs in policies.¹⁹⁷

¹⁸⁷ United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. *Agenda 21*. 1992; United Nations, General Assembly. *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (A/RES/50/1)*. 1996; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *World Programme of Action for Youth*. 2010.

¹⁸⁸ United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. *Agenda 21*. 1992.

¹⁸⁹ United Nations, General Assembly. *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (A/RES/50/1)*. 1996; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *World Programme of Action for Youth*. 2010.

¹⁹⁰ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *The 17 Goals*. N.d.

¹⁹¹ United Nations Children's Fund. *Healthy Environment for Healthy Children - Global Programme Framework*. 2021. pp. 86-88; United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. pp. 10, 23; United Nations, Secretary-General. *Youth2030: Working with and for Young People*. 2018.

¹⁹² United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. pp. 10, 17, 23.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p. 17; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *The 17 Goals*. N.d.

¹⁹⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *The 17 Goals*. N.d.; United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. pp. 23-25.

¹⁹⁵ United Nations, Secretary-General. *Youth2030: Working with and for Young People*. 2018; United Nations Youth Office. *Youth2030, the UN Youth Strategy*. N.d.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ United Nations Children's Fund. *Healthy Environment for Healthy Children - Global Programme Framework*. 2021. pp. 86-88.



Regional organizations have also started to adopt frameworks to ensure children's and youth engagement in their own regions.¹⁹⁸ In 2024, the Council of Europe adopted its *Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on young people and climate action*, a framework aimed at protecting youth's right to engage in climate action.¹⁹⁹ The recommendation focuses heavily on reducing barriers for meaningful participation, including reducing discrimination.²⁰⁰ In 2025, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the *ASEAN Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment*.²⁰¹ While the declaration highlights children and youth as vulnerable populations and individuals critical in stakeholder engagement efforts, the framework significantly reaffirms the need to uphold a "safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment for present and future generations."²⁰² Though the declaration is not legally binding, it is the first framework of its kind to highlight children's and youth's rights as they relate to the environment and engagement in environmental processes in the Southeast Asian region.²⁰³

Role of the International System

Youth are one of nine major groups with which UNEA facilitates engagement, whereby the organization takes specific care to integrate youth needs and priorities into policy and decision-making processes.²⁰⁴ At UNEA-7, held in December 2025, the Assembly adopted resolution 7/6 entitled "Resolution on enhancing the meaningful participation of youth in Environmental Processes and on environmental education," a framework that recognizes and promotes youth participation in environmental processes while simultaneously requesting Member States and United Nations bodies to foster and support youth involvement.²⁰⁵ UNEA also facilitates youth participation through engagement with NGOs; through the UNEP, accredited youth NGOs can obtain observer status at UNEA.²⁰⁶ As of early 2026, UNEP lists 73 children and youth-related accredited organizations, including groups such as EarthCorps, accredited in 2004, and the International Dialogue for Environmental Action, accredited in 2014.²⁰⁷

UNEA further guides UNEP's strategic focus and future priority areas as its governing body.²⁰⁸ UNEP facilitates youth involvement through many pathways, including the Children and Youth Major Group

¹⁹⁸ Save the Children. *Governments Must Take Crucial Step to Protect Environmental Rights for Children in Southeast Asia - Save the Children*. 2025.

¹⁹⁹ Council of Europe. *Adopted New Recommendation on Young People and Climate Action*. 2024; Council of Europe. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on young people and climate action*. 2024.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Association of Southeast Nations. *ASEAN Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment*. 2025.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Save the Children. *Governments Must Take Crucial Step to Protect Environmental Rights for Children in Southeast Asia - Save the Children*. 2025.

²⁰⁴ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Civil Society engagement at the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)*. 2025.

²⁰⁵ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Resolution on enhancing the meaningful participation of youth in Environmental Processes and on environmental education (UNEP/EA.7/Res.6)*. 2025; United Nations Environment Assembly. *Seventh session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-7)*. N.d.

²⁰⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *List of accredited organizations*. 2026.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Change of the Designation of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (A/RES/67/251)*. 2013; United Nations Department of Global Communications. *What is the UN Environment Assembly and why does it matter?*. 2024; United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.



(CYMG).²⁰⁹ CYMG is the main, formal facilitator of child and youth engagement in ecological governance processes within UNEP and the ongoing work of UNEA, connecting individuals and organizations interested in advancing progress on related initiatives.²¹⁰ To fulfill its mandate, CYMG created the Policy Coordination Group, which consults children and youth on issues that are then turned into formal written and verbal position statements provided to UNEP.²¹¹ While CYMG has a special focus on the triple planetary crisis, the organization showcases 13 thematic working groups ranging in focus from green economics and science policy to eco-faith and environmental finance.²¹²

Many international programs have worked to increase youth involvement, both directly and indirectly improving youth participation in environmental processes.²¹³ The Tunza Program, also known as the Tunza Strategy, ran in two phases: the first from 2003 to 2008 and the second from 2009 to 2014.²¹⁴ The program, designed by UNEP, aimed to strengthen youth leadership in environmental issues by increasing opportunities for engagement with educational, informational, environmental, and United Nations-related processes, organizations, and systems.²¹⁵ While independent evaluations conclude that hundreds of young environmental activists interacted with the Tunza Program, the strategy's lack of clear end objectives makes it difficult to assess the degree to which the program successfully provided youth leaders with enhanced environmental knowledge and decision-making insight.²¹⁶ General Assembly resolution 68/130 on "Policies and programmes involving youth" (2013), while not explicitly mentioning environmental processes, similarly emphasizes the importance of education and engagement for youth in achieving progress on sustainable development.²¹⁷ In juxtaposition to the Tunza Strategy, resolution 68/130 focuses more on the role of Member States in promoting and protecting youth participation in global issues.²¹⁸

²⁰⁹ Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. *Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP*. 2025.

²¹⁰ Ibid; Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. *History and Mandate*. 2025.

²¹¹ Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. *United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) & Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR)*. 2025.

²¹² Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. *Thematic Working Groups*. 2025.

²¹³ Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme. *Policy Responses of the United Nations Environment Programme to Tackle Emerging Environmental Problems - Report of the Executive Director - Addendum: Long-term strategy on engagement and involvement of young people in environmental issues (UNEP/GC.22/3/Add.1/Rev.1)*. 2002; United Nations Environment Programme. *Terminal Evaluation of the 2nd Long-Term Strategy on Engagement and Involvement of Young People in Environmental Issues (Tunza Strategy)*. 2016; United Nations, General Assembly. *Policies and programs involving youth (A/RES/68/130)*. 2014.

²¹⁴ Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme. *Policy Responses of the United Nations Environment Programme to Tackle Emerging Environmental Problems - Report of the Executive Director - Addendum: Long-term strategy on engagement and involvement of young people in environmental issues (UNEP/GC.22/3/Add.1/Rev.1)*. 2002. pp. 1-2, 8; United Nations Environment Programme. *Terminal Evaluation of the 2nd Long-Term Strategy on Engagement and Involvement of Young People in Environmental Issues (Tunza Strategy)*. 2016.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme. *Policy Responses of the United Nations Environment Programme to Tackle Emerging Environmental Problems - Report of the Executive Director - Addendum: Long-term strategy on engagement and involvement of young people in environmental issues (UNEP/GC.22/3/Add.1/Rev.1)*. 2002; United Nations Environment Programme. *Terminal Evaluation of the 2nd Long-Term Strategy on Engagement and Involvement of Young People in Environmental Issues (Tunza Strategy)*. 2016. pp. 37-41.

²¹⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *Policies and programs involving youth (A/RES/68/130)*. 2014. pp. 3-4.

²¹⁸ Ibid.



Youth can engage with the United Nations system on environmental and sustainability-related issues through a range of forums.²¹⁹ The Youth Environment Assembly (YEA), hosted under UNEA and facilitated by CYMG, has been recognized as the primary platform for youth engagement in environmental processes, providing an advocacy forum where young people can lead discussions and promote policies in areas such as environmental governance, finance, and green solutions.²²⁰ YEA occurs in advance of UNEA sessions, having taken place before UNEA-5.2, UNEA-6, and UNEA-7.²²¹ Produced in advance of UNEA-7, the 2025 *Global Youth Declaration* highlights six areas of "interconnected transformations," ranging from specific strategic areas of work to broader areas of concern, and includes a discussion of the role of youth as well as 23 recommendations for policy reform.²²² The recommendations are divided into two main categories: youth participation in environmental governance and the introduction of environmentally focused solutions that address systemic, cross-disciplinary issues.²²³ Outside of UNEA and UNEP, ECOSOC hosts the annual ECOSOC Youth Forum, the largest event centered on children's and youth engagement in the international system.²²⁴ While not specifically centered on the environment, this platform is dedicated to gathering youth perspectives on achieving the SDGs, creating a space for dialogue with stakeholders on sustainable science-based solutions to reach the goals.²²⁵

The 2022 creation of a principal United Nations department dedicated specifically to youth, the United Nations Youth Office, highlights the importance of youth engagement on a wider systemic scale.²²⁶ The Youth Office is headed by the Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs and ensures that all youth initiatives relevant to the Secretariat are organized and implemented appropriately.²²⁷ While the framework establishing the office does not mention youth and the environment, it does highlight youth's role in achieving the 2030 Agenda and sustainable development more broadly.²²⁸ However, while not an independent strategic goal in the *United Nations Youth Office Strategic Plan 2025-2028* (2025), environmental sustainability and youth-led initiatives to achieve the SDGs are highlighted under Strategic Priority 3 entitled "Promoting Socio-Economic Opportunities for Youth."²²⁹

²¹⁹ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth*. N.d.

²²⁰ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Resolution on enhancing the meaningful participation of youth in Environmental Processes and on environmental education (UNEP/EA.7/Res.6)*. 2025. p. 2; United Nations Environment Programme. *Youth push for action on environmental crises*. 2025; Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. *Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP*. 2025.

²²¹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *UNEA from A to Z - Youth Environment Assembly*. N.d.; Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. *Youth Environment Assembly 2025*. 2025.

²²² Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. *Global Youth Declaration on the Environment*. 2025.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth*. N.d.

²²⁵ Ibid; United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *ECOSOC Youth Forum 2025*. N.d.

²²⁶ United Nations, General Assembly. *Establishment of the United Nations Youth Office (A/RES/76/306)*. 2022. pp. 1-2; United Nations, General Assembly. *Policies and programmes involving youth - Report of the Secretary General (A/80/375)*. 2025. p. 3.

²²⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *Establishment of the United Nations Youth Office (A/RES/76/306)*. 2022. p. 2; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth*. N.d.

²²⁸ Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Paris Agreement*. 2015; United Nations, General Assembly. *Establishment of the United Nations Youth Office (A/RES/76/306)*. 2022. pp. 1-2.

²²⁹ United Nations Youth Office. *United Nations Youth Office Strategic Plan 2025-2028*. 2025. p. 12.



Regional organizations, NGOs, and programs are also vital pathways for youth to participate in environmental processes, especially within their home communities and states.²³⁰ For instance, children and youth in Southeast Asia benefit from ASEAN's Working Group on Environmental Education, an initiative designed to increase environmental knowledge while assisting the capacity-building efforts of associated youth groups and organizations.²³¹ NGOs, such as the Youth Café in Africa, additionally aim to foster global and community-based involvement in governance, business, innovative policy development, and other social action on matters that impact young individuals and their communities.²³²

The Impacts of Environmental Education on Youth Engagement

Curating environmental stewardship, literacy, and knowledge among today's youth, particularly through education, is critical to ensuring the effective participation of young people in environmental processes.²³³ Education is important to teach youth how to engage with nature in a sustainable manner throughout their lives and to allow them to effectively engage in environmental processes.²³⁴ According to the Global Center on Adaptation, research indicates that higher levels of education among youth correlate with a greater likelihood of engagement in policy creation.²³⁵ Education can happen in and out of the classroom on all levels of the international system, through after-school programs, workshops, and grassroots activities.²³⁶ One example, UNEP's Tide Turners Plastic Challenge, engages youth through the completion of environmental "quests," challenging youth to combat pollution in their home communities and rewarding their environmental engagement with badges and certificates.²³⁷ Nevertheless, updates in core academic curricula often lag behind emerging environmental challenges and newly observed consequences of environmental crises due to the time and resources required to change or fully update courses.²³⁸ According to UNEP, this gap makes it important for steps to be taken to ensure educational content remains timely while programs are adapted over time to encompass developing environmental issues.²³⁹

Barriers exist for youth to access environmental education, including the impacts of environmental hazards on accessibility.²⁴⁰ According to UNICEF, over 242 million pre-primary to upper-secondary

²³⁰ Geneva Environment Network. *Youth and the Environment*. 2025; Sok et al. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Secretariat. *Youth and Environmental Actions: Narratives from ASEAN*. 2020; The Youth Café. *The Youth Cafe*. 2025; United Nations Children's Fund. *Youth sensitised to become climate champions - Joint Press Release*. 2026.

²³¹ Sok et al. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Secretariat. *Youth and Environmental Actions: Narratives from ASEAN*. 2020.

²³² The Youth Café. *The Youth Cafe*. 2025.

²³³ Buechner et al. United Nations Children's Fund. *How to Build A Sustainable Future? Educate Children About the Environment*. 2025.

²³⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *Five Ways in which education is driving environmental action*. 2026.

²³⁵ Chan et al. Global Center on Adaptation et al. *Young People and Drivers and Barriers to Climate Adaptation Action*. 2021. p. 19.

²³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Five Ways in which education is driving environmental action*. 2026.

²³⁷ Ibid; United Nations Environment Programme. *Tide Turners Plastic Challenge*. 2026.

²³⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *How training in green skills could help turn the tide against plastic pollution*. 2025.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Chan et al. Global Center on Adaptation et al. *Young People and Drivers and Barriers to Climate Adaptation Action*. 2021. p. 7; United Nations Children's Fund. *Learning interrupted: Global snapshot of climate-related school disruptions in 2024*. 2025.



students located in 85 states faced educational disruptions directly related to climate change and its impacts in 2024.²⁴¹ Working to reduce environmental hazards and disruptions of climate change and other environmental crises, coupled with providing access to proper educational resources and curricula, enables students to engage more effectively in educational endeavors related to the environment and environmental processes.²⁴²

Education as a facilitator of effective engagement is reflected in numerous international frameworks, which identify environmental education as a necessity for youth.²⁴³ Article 28 of the CRC specifically names access to education as children's right; when paired with Articles 12, 13, and 29, children have the right to an education and educational resources to form informed opinions and to take action on caring for the environment.²⁴⁴ SDGs 4 and 13 (climate action) under the 2030 Agenda also promote education for youth, with the former highlighting the need for quality education at all levels that subsequently educates students on sustainable development issues and practices.²⁴⁵ The latter, especially target 13.3, explicitly notes the importance of education in advancing climate action and related initiatives.²⁴⁶ More recently, UNEA resolution 7/6 on "Enhancing the meaningful participation of youth in Environmental Processes and on environmental education" (2025) placed special emphasis on education, noting how youth have created progress across sectors and systems while simultaneously encouraging states to improve the integration of environmental issues and environmental stewardship skill-building into their educational systems.²⁴⁷

Many international organizations, NGOs, and programs assist youth in building environmental literacy and provide access to associated educational opportunities.²⁴⁸ UNICEF has worked to expand environmental education programs aimed at teaching students critical skills to combat the impacts of ongoing crises and adapt to changing conditions, especially with regard to climate change.²⁴⁹ Simultaneously, UNICEF has advocated for the creation and child-sensitive implementation of education policies that are resilient to these changing environmental circumstances.²⁵⁰ The organization has also implemented regional programs, such as the Green Schools Initiative (GSI) in West and Central Africa, to build resilient

²⁴¹ United Nations Children's Fund. *Learning interrupted: Global snapshot of climate-related school disruptions in 2024*. 2025.

²⁴² Chan et al. Global Center on Adaptation et al. *Young People and Drivers and Barriers to Climate Adaptation Action*. 2021. p. 7; United States Fund for UNICEF. *Climate Change and Children's Education*. 2025.

²⁴³ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Resolution on enhancing the meaningful participation of youth in Environmental Processes and on environmental education (UNEP/EA.7/Res.6)*. 2025. p. 1; United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. pp. 17, 23; United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Rights of the Child (A/RES/44/25)*. 1989. pp. 168-170.

²⁴⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Rights of the Child (A/RES/44/25)*. 1989. pp. 168-170.

²⁴⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *The 17 Goals*. N.d.; United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. pp. 17, 23.

²⁴⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *The 17 Goals*. N.d.; United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 23.

²⁴⁷ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Resolution on enhancing the meaningful participation of youth in Environmental Processes and on environmental education (UNEP/EA.7/Res.6)*. 2025.

²⁴⁸ United States Fund for UNICEF. *Climate Change and Children's Education*. 2025.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.



educational systems.²⁵¹ GSI aims to make educational institutions more environmentally resilient while using such initiatives to get whole educational communities involved in climate action.²⁵² Youth can also find opportunities to engage in activism through NGOs such as the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), an environmental organization that works in over 85 states.²⁵³ As one of six programs FEE runs, Young Reporters for the Environment has educated thousands of youth reporters over the last 30 years, helping youth research, document, and develop solutions for local environmental problems in their communities.²⁵⁴

The Role of Digital Technology in International Youth Engagement

As “digital natives,” many members of today’s youth are increasingly able to harness modern digital technologies to bolster environmental engagement and innovation; nevertheless, numerous barriers continue to prevent full access to the benefits of these technologies.²⁵⁵ United Nations data from 2022 indicates that youth are the leading demographic in “digital adoption and innovation.”²⁵⁶ This includes adopting and adapting digital and technological skill sets to combat the impacts of ecological issues within their own communities.²⁵⁷ Strengthening youth’s digital literacy, the ability to acquire and apply digital technologies, skills and information, and technological understanding, can bolster youth’s capacity to produce successful technology-based solutions and related policies better adapted to new and changing environmental issues.²⁵⁸ However, digital disparities remain, particularly in underfunded and rural communities where access to digital technologies remains limited.²⁵⁹ In applying digital tools, youth may face challenges in building networks, including finding mentors and partnerships, and securing funding to implement their innovative solutions.²⁶⁰

The range of applications of digital technologies can both aid youth in the creation of new, innovative environmental solutions and promote youth participation in environmental processes.²⁶¹ Individually, youth

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Foundation for Environmental Education. *Foundation for Environmental Education*. 2023.

²⁵⁴ Ibid; Young Reporters for the Environment. *Young Reporters for the Environment (YRE)*. 2023; United Nations Environment Programme. *Five ways in which education is driving environmental action*. 2026.

²⁵⁵ Dajana et al. World Economic Forum. *How today’s youth are taking the lead in global climate action*. 2023; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Youth Are Key to Accelerate Innovative Climate Technologies*. 2022; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth digital engagement crucial for achieving SDGs: Guterres*. 2024; United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. *Unleashing youth-led digital innovation for climate action and sustainable development*. 2024.

²⁵⁶ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Youth digital engagement crucial for achieving SDGs: Guterres*. 2024.

²⁵⁷ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Youth Are Key to Accelerate Innovative Climate Technologies*. 2022; United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. *AI and youth: Catalysts for climate action and resilience*. 2026.

²⁵⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *UNIVOC Connect - TEVTlopedia Glossary: Digital literacy*. 2025; United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. *AI and youth: Catalysts for climate action and resilience*. 2026.

²⁵⁹ United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. *Unleashing youth-led digital innovation for climate action and sustainable development*. 2024.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Youth Are Key to Accelerate Innovative Climate Technologies*. 2022; United Nations Environment Programme et al. *Youth, technology, and transformation*. 2025.



are using digital technologies in multifaceted approaches to environmental issues, for instance, in creative endeavors such as storytelling to promote environmental awareness and action or in the promotion of grassroots efforts.²⁶² Promoting environmental awareness and action may include the use of social media, personal websites, and interactive digital resources.²⁶³ The utilization of mobile applications has also allowed youth to contribute directly to conservation efforts through data collection, while social media usage has enabled young individuals to create their own educational content.²⁶⁴ Access to e-commerce platforms has helped connect young environmental entrepreneurs with sources of funding.²⁶⁵ New technologies, including artificial intelligence, are additionally helping youth to be better climate activists and better protectors of the world's ecosystems.²⁶⁶ This range of applications can be seen in projects such as the GreenSCENT Project, an initiative funded by the European Union Green Deal Call, which includes both augmented-reality educational tools as well as hands-on opportunities to collect and analyze conservation and other related sustainability data.²⁶⁷ Consequently, GreenSCENT has facilitated direct engagement in environmental processes by enabling youth to participate in numerous youth design assemblies, discussing what they learned from completing the hands-on challenges.²⁶⁸

Digital technology and youth have emerged as a priority topic in recent years, remaining a consistent theme within United Nations events and programs.²⁶⁹ In 2024, "Digital Transformations" was a key point of discussion at the Summit of the Future Youth Action Day, where participants contributed to dialogue on climate and environmental sustainability issues and engaged in interactive strategy-creation sessions.²⁷⁰ The 2024 *Pact for the Future* and its annexes, the *Global Digital Compact* (GDC) and the *Declaration on Future Generations*, were adopted as a result.²⁷¹ The GDC highlights how digital technology's connectivity can help address environmental issues while additionally calling for capacity-building measures for youth, women, and girls.²⁷² In the same year, the theme of the International Youth Day was "From Clicks to Progress: Youth Digital Pathways for Sustainable Development."²⁷³ Observed annually on August 12, the 2024 rendition highlighted how youth's use of digital technology can accelerate achievement of the SDGs, especially by reducing the costs of associated initiatives.²⁷⁴

²⁶² United Nations Environment Programme et al. *Youth, technology, and transformation*. 2025.

²⁶³ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. *From Clicks to Progress: Youth Digital Pathways for Sustainable Development*. 2024.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. *AI and youth: Catalysts for climate action and resilience*. 2026.

²⁶⁷ European Union, European Commission. *Engaging the youth to build a better tomorrow*. 2025.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ United Nations Futures Lab Network. *Youth Action Day at the Summit of the Future: Strategic Foresight in Climate and Environmental Sustainability*. N.d.; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *International Youth Day 2024: Youth Digital Innovation for Sustainable Development*. 2024.

²⁷⁰ United Nations Futures Lab Network. *Youth Action Day at the Summit of the Future: Strategic Foresight in Climate and Environmental Sustainability*. N.d.

²⁷¹ United Nations, Summit of the Future. *Pact for the Future*. N.d.; United Nations, General Assembly. *The Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1)*. 2024.

²⁷² United Nations, General Assembly. *The Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1)*. 2024. pp. 39-41.

²⁷³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *International Youth Day 2024: Youth Digital Innovation for Sustainable Development*. 2024.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.



Conclusion

Enabling youth to participate in environmental processes goes beyond simply providing opportunities for engagement; efforts to include youth must also be accessible, inclusive, and educational, while keeping in mind the needs and priorities of young individuals globally.²⁷⁵ Youth remain critical actors at all levels of environmental dialogue and action, bringing real-world insight to help build better solutions to protect the Earth.²⁷⁶ Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of the United Nations, and more specifically of Member States, to uphold the rights of children as detailed in the CRC, ensuring that young individuals are able to participate fully in environmental processes globally.²⁷⁷ This includes increasing the accessibility of resources, including technology and education, that youth need to participate meaningfully in environmental processes.²⁷⁸

Further Research

As delegates conduct further research and debate how to involve youth in environmental processes, they should consider the following: What does “meaningful” participation look like in the context of environmental affairs? What barriers continue to actively prevent the full participation of youth in environmental processes? What resources could better support youth’s ability to engage in both environmental dialogue and initiatives? Could a universal definition of youth improve youth involvement in international systems? How can the United Nations better involve youth in environmental processes across the international system? How can states and regional actors better involve youth in environmental processes on the regional, national, and local levels?

²⁷⁵ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Resolution on enhancing the meaningful participation of youth in Environmental Processes and on environmental education (UNEP/EA.7/Res.6)*. 2025. p. 1.

²⁷⁶ United Nations Children’s Fund. *Climate change and environment*. N.d.; World Wildlife Fund. *The Value of Youth Voices in Conservation*. 2024.

²⁷⁷ Geneva Environment Network. *Youth and the Environment*. 2025.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.



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<https://www.cymgenvironment.net/unea-cpr-youth>

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<https://www.un.org/en/desa/international-youth-day-2024-youth-digital-innovation-sustainable-development>

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