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Creation of a science-policy panel on chemicals, waste and pollution: a landmark agreement for the environment?

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Following up on a resolution adopted in 2022 by the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and after four rounds of negotiations, an intergovernmental meeting decided on 20 June to establish a new science-policy panel on chemicals, waste and pollution, adding to the IPCC and IPBES. The three global environmental crises (climate, biodiversity and pollution) are now being addressed by bodies mobilizing scientific knowledge to support the action needed at international and national level. This is a positive signal of support for [multilateralism¹](#) and the role of science at a time of intense debates and conflicts. Discussions were sometimes tense, reflecting different national visions (particularly on the rules governing international environmental institutions) and the diversity of concerns expressed on environmental issues. Ultimately, the creation of the 'Chemicals Panel' is a significant step forward, but some of its operating procedures still need to be clarified, if possible at the first plenary meeting of the new panel.

The last session of the OEGW-3-2 negotiating group on the establishment of a new science-policy platform, referred to for convenience as the 'Chemicals Panel,' dedicated to chemicals, waste and pollution², took place in Punta del Este (Uruguay) from 15 to 19 June 2025 and resulted in an agreement confirmed at an intergovernmental meeting held immediately afterwards on 20 June. The platform will be called the 'Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution' (ISP-CWP) and will have the status of an independent body, with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) providing the secretariat for the time being.

Founding principles

The [founding document](#) specifies the Panel's scope of application, covering the following objectives and functions:

- conducting forward-looking analyses ('*horizon scanning*') to identify early warning signs of critical developments that will require political action;
- conducting assessments of issues requiring policy responses;
- identifying knowledge needs, bringing researchers and policymakers together, and disseminating information;
- promoting information sharing, particularly with developing countries, and capacity building in the areas covered by the Panel.

As IDDRI already pointed out ([IDDRI, 2023](#)), some of these functions are specific to IPBES and not covered by the IPCC, and are very welcome, particularly the forward-looking monitoring function, which is essential in a field where uncertainties and knowledge gaps are significant yet decisive for decision-making (cocktail effects between pollutants, chronic effects, but also scenarios for reducing plastics and chemicals in business models and uses, etc.). The function of identifying knowledge needs also places this platform more explicitly upstream of research agendas than its climate and biodiversity equivalents. Key data and information, for example on the toxicity and ecotoxicity risks of chemical molecules, are often held by private manufacturing industries, making it all the more important for this panel to have a role in sharing information with public authorities and other stakeholders in developing countries.

The founding document also sets out the operating principles, with a particular focus on ensuring the platform's independence and credibility, seeking consensus in decision-making processes, ensuring the transparency of its work, mobilizing all relevant expertise in terms of disciplines and knowledge holders, and producing outputs that are relevant to policymaking ('*policy relevant*') without being prescriptive ('*policy prescriptive*').

The Panel is led by a plenary assembly open to UN member countries, as well as observers for whom participation criteria are still being finalized based on an inclusive approach. The plenary assembly is responsible for adopting the work programme and appointing the members of the Interdisciplinary Expert Committee (IEC), which plays a central role in conducting the work. IEC members are selected on the basis of broad expertise, including socio-economic. Observers may be invited to attend IEC sessions, again in accordance with rules that have yet to be specified. The definition of the work programme will be a particularly strategic next step, for example to see when key issues that were raised during the negotiations on a new treaty on plastic pollution ([Iddri, 2024](#)) could and should be addressed, and to consider economic transition scenarios in the event that the production of pollutants and plastics is reduced at source.

Discussions that have not yet been concluded included gender issues, taking into account the expertise of local communities alongside indigenous peoples, as well as health issues, and the expected role of the World Health Organisation (WHO), which it is hoped will be substantial.

The issues not resolved in Punta del Este will need to be re-examined at the first plenary meeting of the Panel, which could be held soon in Geneva at the invitation of Switzerland, which has also offered to host the secretariat of the new panel, which would thus be close to the secretariats of the chemical conventions, the WHO and the European office of UNEP. These mainly concern certain procedural rules such as the admission of observers, the preparation and adoption of the work programme and deliverables, and the avoidance of conflicts of interest. The latter issue was highlighted as particularly important by civil society for two reasons: given the central role of data and information held by chemical manufacturers on the specific subject of this panel; and given the growing number of representatives from the oil and petrochemical industries in environmental negotiations, particularly on climate and plastics.

What next in a damaged multilateral context?

Although the States and the UNEP expressed their satisfaction and desire to move forward at the end of the Punta del Este meeting, some NGOs expressed concern about the numerous attempts to obstruct progress, the adoption of the consensus rule, which is now a *fait accompli*, and, more generally, the uncooperative attitude displayed by certain countries. Indeed, the deteriorating context of international relations and the weakening of the United Nations, as well as the reluctance of certain countries to link environmental and health issues, are factors that fuel mistrust and slow progress. Nevertheless, despite Russia's repeated positions on the obligation to reach consensus and the desire of the United States and Argentina to exclude the concept of gender—which is widely accepted at the international level—the founding document was adopted without opposition from these countries, allowing progress to be made.

In this context, which is reminiscent of the positions taken in the negotiations on the treaty to eliminate plastic pollution, discussions on the provisions to be finalized and on the preparation of the first work programme are likely to give rise to paralyzing guerrilla tactics. However, the scientific community and civil society, the secretariats of the relevant multilateral environmental agreements, UNEP and the World Health Organisation, as well as the many proactive States in Europe and around the world, will ensure that this Panel lives up to the expectations it will raise as soon as it is established.

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But a weakened multilateralism, in which the consensus rule can allow all kinds of deadlock and where a narrow view of global environmental issues stands in opposition to the systemic view of sustainable development.

2

In 2022, the scientific journal *Lancet Global Health* published a [series of alarming analyses](#) on the health and environmental impact of new pollutants, particularly chemicals, and called for the establishment of an international platform dedicated to pollution.

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