



BLOG POST January 8th 2026

UNEA-7: A crucial forum for global environmental governance

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 Reading time: 4 min



At a time when the most fundamental rules of international law are being challenged, the international community continues to show its commitment to advancing environmental multilateralism, as was confirmed at the 7th session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), held in early December 2025 in Nairobi, Kenya. Every two years, the UNEA meets to address the most pressing environmental challenges, which are often not covered by formal conventions. This assembly plays a unique role: its resolutions have been the catalyst for major global processes, such as the negotiations on plastic pollution, but as it is not bound by any binding treaty, its decisions must be formalized through other instruments and arenas. This situation gives the UNEA considerable influence but also a certain fragility within the architecture of multilateral environmental governance.

How does the UNEA work?

Like most multilateral meetings, the UNEA combines formal negotiations, plenary sessions, working groups, side events and numerous informal exchanges. The first week is devoted to negotiations between permanent representatives based in Nairobi, Kenya, followed by a second week when high-level national experts join the meeting. Mid-week sessions focus on synergies between multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), while the high-level segment—comparable to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)—includes national statements and speeches by high-profile officials. At the same time, negotiations continue behind the scenes. The final day concludes with plenary sessions, the adoption of decisions and final statements.

Side events: where innovation takes shape

The UNEA is not limited to official discussions. Side events often spark new ideas and foster cross-sector collaboration and civil society participation. For example, during UNEA-7 in December 2025, a session on global monitoring of air pollutants inspired new thinking on plastic pollution monitoring. Another event highlighted overwhelming support for stronger action on plastic waste, a clear sign of global mobilization on this issue.

Overall, a constructive political vibe

UNEA-7 closely followed the major conferences organized under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD-SBSTTA), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), raising concerns about the repercussions of the tensions arising from these meetings. However, the atmosphere proved to be generally positive, even though the United States boycotted the negotiations, only intervening at the closing plenary session to declare that it was not bound by the decisions of the UNEA and that it was reconsidering its participation in United Nations bodies. Ironically, a technical problem abruptly interrupted the US statement—just as the government was about to announce its reassessment—provoking strong reactions from the audience.

Key items on the agenda

Delegates addressed a wide range of topics, including:^{[1](#)}

- **response to forest fires:** voluntary resource-sharing mechanisms;
- **proliferation of Sargassum seaweed:** stimulating science and collaboration;
- **coral reefs:** taking conservation measures to encourage resilience;
- **glaciers and karst ecosystems:** recognizing their unique contribution, vulnerability to climate change and promoting specific conservation measures;
- **synergies between MEAs:** strengthening coordination through the Bern Process;
- **mining and extraction:** a proposal to create a new subsidiary body was rejected, but the United Nations Environment Programme will continue its work in this area;
- **chemicals and waste:** progress in establishing a global intergovernmental scientific expert group, modelled on the IPCC (climate) and IPBES (biodiversity);

- **Institutional reform:** a Mexican proposal to consolidate all MEA secretariats in Nairobi was withdrawn after intense debate;
- **Deep-sea ecosystems:** differences of opinion on the mandate of the UNEP and that of the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea prevented the adoption of this motion;
- **Strengthening measures to respond to environmental crimes:** differences of opinion on the need to define these crimes and their definition, as well as the relevance of a review under the UNEA, led to the withdrawal of this resolution.

Looking ahead: can the UNEA be more effective?

The 8th session of the UNEA will be held from 6 to 10 December 2027, with subsequent sessions scheduled for the end of February in odd-numbered years. But the 9th session will unfold over only three days.

Despite its importance, the UNEA faces structural challenges.

Negotiations on technical issues, such as karst ecosystems, are often conducted by diplomats who must constantly consult with experts in their respective countries, slowing progress. Could an online negotiation process, such as that used by the IUCN, allow experts to interact directly, accelerate results and free up time for face-to-face meetings?

Similarly, the current format of high-level segments is questionable. National statements rarely influence negotiations and could be pre-recorded and broadcast online. During high-level roundtables, participants' interventions during dialogues often stray from the topic, turning into showcases of national successes rather than constructive contributions.

Despite these challenges, the UNEA remains the only forum where cross-cutting reflection and exploration of new issues offer a unique opportunity to think, plan and coordinate efforts beyond the silos of different MEAs and bridge the gaps between these agreements.

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The Earth Negotiation Bulletin of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) provides a detailed summary of these debates: <https://enb.iisd.org/unea7-oecpr7>

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