

nature

UN summits: one step forward, two steps back

The system that ensures international agreements are informed by a consensus of rigorous research is under severe stress.

People in some 70 countries took part in various national elections this year, a record number. And in March, *Nature* reported that results in at least five polls could either boost or block climate action (see *Nature* **627**, 22–25; 2024). Overall, it has been a dismal year, particularly for science in multilateral policymaking. The tension and mistrust between nations evident in the daily news is affecting the use of science in decision-making. Research is being ignored in international talks designed to meet global challenges, including those addressed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Campaigners, scientists and policymakers are becoming ever more frustrated. Some are taking action through legislative means – this month, the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the Netherlands, has been hearing arguments about states’ obligations under international law to protect people from the effects of climate change. Others are opting for a more direct route, through science activism.

In the climate-change sector especially, there’s a view that the processes of the summits known as Conference of the Parties (COP) have had their day or, at the very least, need to be reformed. The research community needs to carefully and systematically study why scientific knowledge is being pushed out, as a first step to finding a way forward.

Twelve months of summitry

Let’s start with international climate negotiations. Even by COP standards, the COP29 climate-change conference in Baku last month ended with unusual acrimony between rich and poor nations about who is ultimately responsible for tackling the climate crisis. The funds eventually agreed – US\$300 billion annually for developing clean-energy technologies and for nations to adapt to the effects of climate change – are inadequate to help the world avert dangerous levels of climate change, and to help some of the most vulnerable people deal with its effects.

The UN COP16 biodiversity meeting in Cali, Colombia, also ended without the funding boost needed to restore and protect nature. Countries pledged \$163 million, which is orders of magnitude short of the \$200 billion a year needed to reach the goal of protecting 30% of the world’s land and seas by 2030. Delegates did agree that large companies should pay if they made a profit using genetic information from nature, but payments will be voluntary.

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The international community is also sharply divided on the scope of an agreement that is being negotiated to end plastics pollution. The latest talks in Busan, South Korea, have been extended into 2025. Talks on a pandemic treaty have also been pushed to next year. African nations are at odds with Europe and the United States over a request that low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) should have preferential access to pandemic-related products that are developed using their data.

And at the end of last week, delegates left the UN conference on dealing with droughts and desertification (UNCCD) in Riyadh without arranging to begin talks on a legally binding protocol to tackle the issue. However, they did agree to expand the UNCCD’s body of independent scientific advisers. September’s Summit of the Future in New York City, organized by UN secretary-general António Guterres also ended with some positive outcomes, including a bold statement that recognizes science as essential to tackling global challenges in its final document, the Pact for the Future. But questions need to be asked as to how this statement can be implemented in the current, highly polarized political climate.

Shrinking science

It might seem that the world is in a golden age of science in multilateral policymaking. Researchers at universities, in campaign groups and in industry are attending COPs and other meetings in considerable numbers: at least 3,000 scientists attended last year’s COP28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. They have a variety of roles. Some advise nations’ delegates, the policymakers involved in treaty negotiations. Others are members of official UN science advisory committees. And some come to the meetings to take advantage of the presence of the global media to publicize their research. And yet, despite scientists’ presence, it is evident to observers that COP delegates are not taking research into account in the actual talks. If they were, then negotiating positions would not be as polarized as they are becoming.

For instance, *Nature* argued last month that a study of climate finance by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) would help to take some of the heat out of disagreements over money. Before the IPCC can commission such a study, a few countries have to propose it. However, until now, there have been no takers. This lack of interest seems like a break from the past, when research helped to shape legally binding agreements, such as the 1989 Montreal Protocol to prohibit the use of ozone-depleting substances, and the 1997 Kyoto Climate Protocol. And in 2015, research was at the core of the design of the SDGs.

UN under pressure

Even though groups of scientists in several countries have proposed ways to end plastic pollution, they are struggling to make their voices heard at the talks on a plastics treaty. This is because the UN still hasn’t organized a formal system for researchers to advise during the discussions.

It’s worth reflecting for a moment on why research is currently struggling to have an impact. When the present system of science advice in UN meetings was originally

established, the United States and European countries were the world's largest economies. Their delegates often dominated proceedings, or at least commanded an outside presence during talks. Much of the research that underpinned UN environmental agreements also came from these nations, as did the scientists observing the talks and many of the world's influential media outlets covering them.

But that world is changing. China is the second largest economy globally and India is on a path to becoming the third. An increasing amount of SDG-related research is now coming from LMICs. At the same time, the place of science in negotiations is affected by this shift in the balance of power. Put simply: when research is performed, or funded, by high-income countries, it is perceived by some in LMICs as being biased in favour of the negotiating positions of the governments of those nations.

Overall, the system that scientists use to access and influence UN environmental agreements is under strain. Meeting organizers, delegates and leaders of research institutions must find a way forward together. Science-based decision-making is what will ultimately help the world to resolve the crises it faces. It's important to understand how and why research is being pushed to the margins and what needs to be done to get policy back on track.

Give 'science for peace' a chance

An initiative from two research organizations to boost the role of science in peace-building in Africa needs to be supported.

The fall of the regime of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, which brought widespread joy and optimism, was a rare and welcome development in what has mostly been another devastating year of violence and conflict around the world.

Wars in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan have made the past year one of the deadliest in recent times, according to the latest Armed Conflict Survey (see go.nature.com/3z565x), produced by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), based in London. Worldwide, nearly 200,000 people were killed between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024, a 37% rise from the previous 12-month period. Mark Rutte, the former Netherlands prime minister, now head of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), said last week that NATO must prepare for a "wartime mindset", and urged member states to allocate more money to military budgets. In 2023, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, world military spending had risen to an all-time high of nearly US\$2.5 trillion, the ninth consecutive annual increase (see go.nature.com/4gggmuf).

Africa's leaders and their international partners need to sit up and listen."

In Africa, military spending was one-fifth higher than it was in 2022. But are more wars inevitable? Why can't peace be more of a priority? These questions need to be asked, and they make a new initiative called Science 4 Peace Africa all the more timely.

At last week's African Academy of Sciences (AAS) general assembly in Abuja, Nigeria, Lise Korsten, president of the AAS, which is headquartered in Nairobi, and Sara Clarke-Habibi, a peace-building specialist at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in Geneva, Switzerland, outlined a way for the African scientific community to work with stakeholders in the pursuit of peace and in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Korsten and Clarke-Habibi have set themselves a monumental task, and they are asking the right questions. Perhaps most importantly, their plan does not assume that wars are inevitable. Africa's leaders and their international partners need to sit up and listen to what they are proposing.

Science 4 Peace Africa aims to establish the main drivers of conflict in the continent and see how science cooperation can address them. The approach has two aspects: first, specialists across disciplines and sectors, including research, policy and humanitarian relief, will map existing peace-building initiatives that involve the scientific community and highlight future opportunities. This will then feed into more-detailed consultations for each region. The second aspect is capacity-building: the initiative will train students and researchers in using peace-building tools in education and scholarship. "Research, innovation and teaching can actually reinforce conflict drivers when not developed in a conflict-sensitive way," Clarke-Habibi and Korsten write in the project's concept note.

This is important work not just for the knowledge and skills it will generate, but also because it will give scientists visibility in fields in which they can lack influence. Science is often not well represented in diplomacy or peace-building, a point also made in a *Communications Engineering* comment article published last month (M. M. López *et al. Commun. Eng.* 3, 159; 2024). The authors of the article say that peace-building efforts are led by people with backgrounds in social and political sciences, law, diplomacy and humanitarian relief. Those with backgrounds in science, engineering and technology need to be among those doing strategic planning. Peace itself is foundational to the SDGs, not least SDG 16: peace, justice and strong institutions. "When regions are destabilized, research is often interrupted, resources diverted, partnerships falter and knowledge exchange and innovation uptake come to a halt," say Clarke-Habibi and Korsten.

Peace-building organizations such as the Pugwash Conferences on Science in World Affairs were established by scientists in the wake of previous global conflicts. But, they are finding it tough to be heard amid the constant and rising drumbeat of war. The AAS and UNITAR have an innovative plan. It has seed funding from South Africa's government, and now needs support from other funders and policymakers. There is no law of nature that says that there must be more conflicts and that more people must lose their lives.