

Environmental Treaty-Making in Decline: Trends in Multilateral and Bilateral Cooperation

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Summary

For many years, States have relied on treaties to address environmental challenges such as biodiversity protection, pollution control, and climate change. However, a shift occurred in recent years. Environmental cooperation through treaties has been declining, despite the intensifying impacts of environmental degradation on populations. While this trend began more than a decade ago, it has become increasingly pronounced, raising concerns about the international community's capacity to respond collectively to environmental crises.

Multilateral Cooperation Under Strain

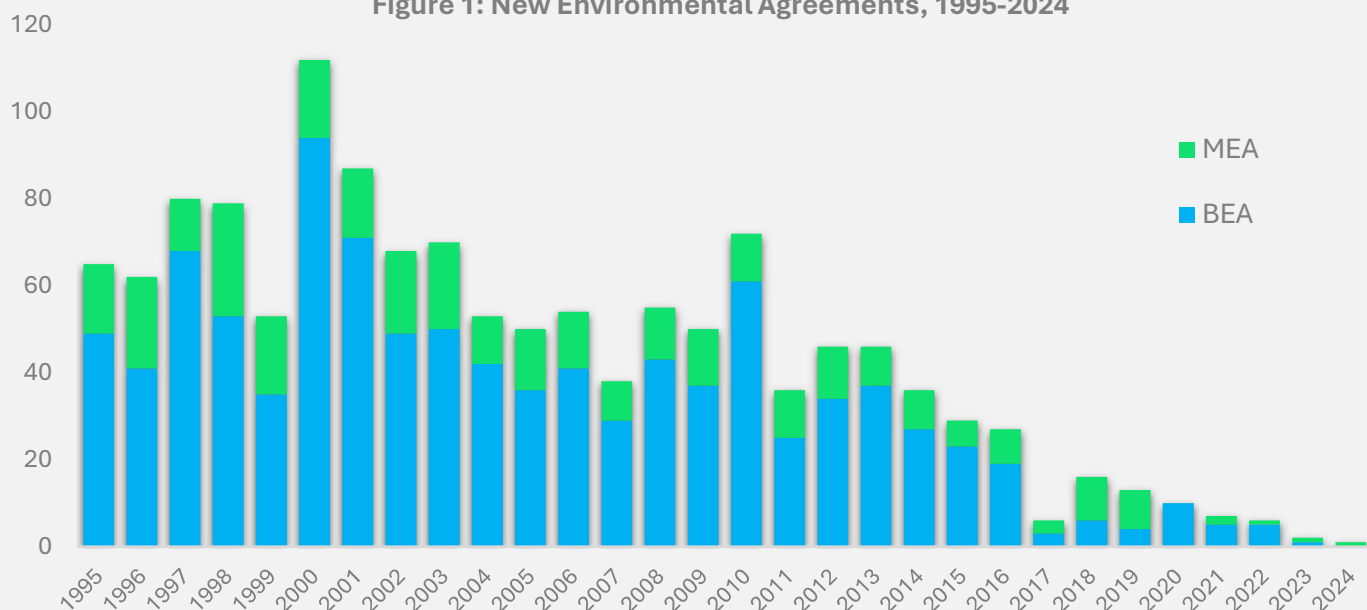
The conclusion of both bilateral (BEAs) and multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) has continued to decline in recent years. Between 2020 and 2024, the average number of agreements concluded fell by 40%.

This downward trend is particularly pronounced for multilateral agreements. The number of MEAs concluded between 2020 and 2024 dropped by 86% compared to 2015-2019. For instance, 8 MEAs were concluded in 2016, whereas only 2 MEAs were concluded in 2022.

Overall, environmental cooperation through treaties is becoming more limited, with a notable decline in multilateral efforts

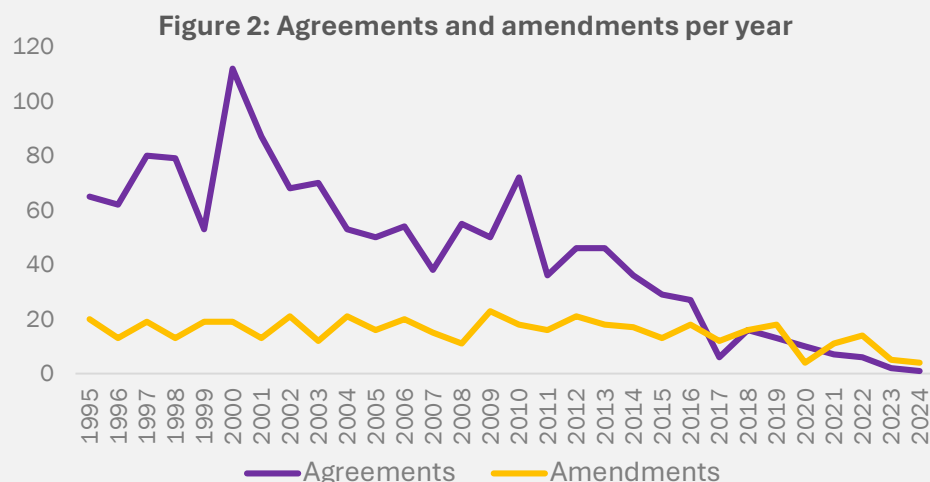
Bilateral agreements remain the more frequent form of environmental treaty. Between 1995 and 2024, the number of BEAs concluded annually was, on average, 50% higher than that of MEAs. Overall, environmental cooperation through treaties is becoming more limited, with a notable decline in multilateral efforts. Figure 1 illustrates these trends.

Figure 1: New Environmental Agreements, 1995-2024



A Shift in Pace: Fewer Agreements and Amendments

One possible explanation for the decline in the number of environmental agreements is the increased use of amendments. As more treaties become eligible for revision, countries may prioritize amending existing agreements over concluding new ones. Since 2017 (with the exception of 2020), the number of amendments has consistently exceeded the number of new agreements. Between 2019 and 2024, there were twice as many amendments per year as new treaties concluded.



However, this shift does not fully compensate for the overall decline in environmental agreements. From 2015 to 2024, the average annual number of amendments was 34% lower than the average recorded between 1995 and 2014. In short, while amendments have become more frequent than new agreements in recent years, both are experiencing an overall downward trend.

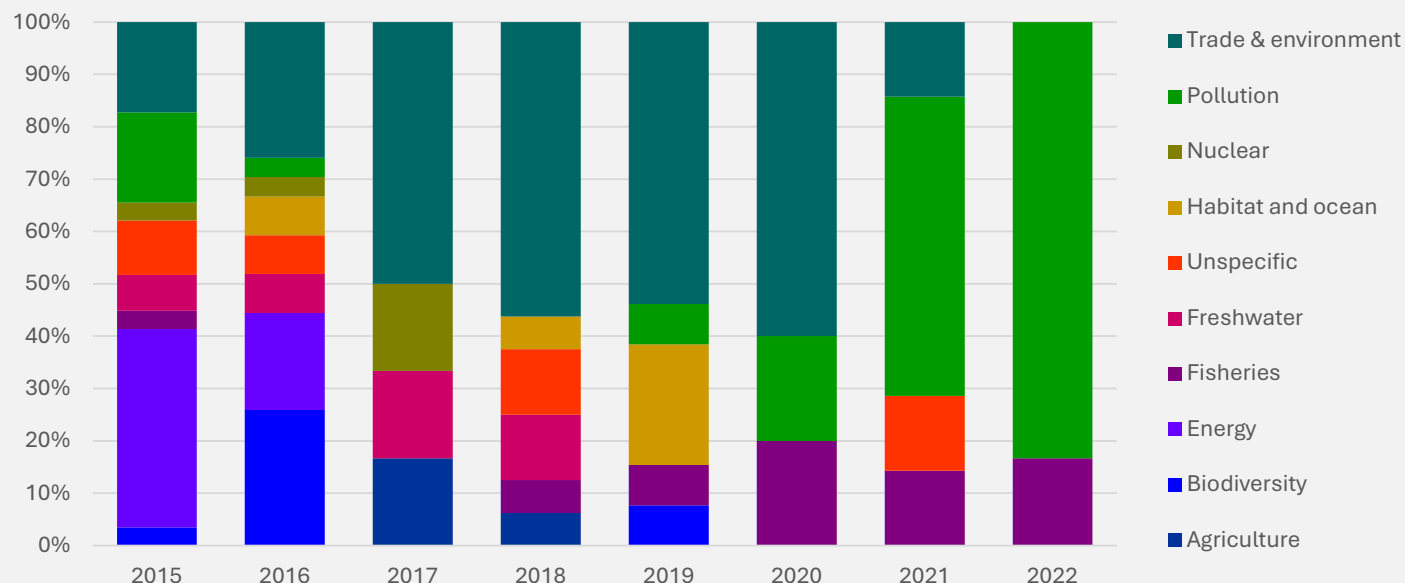
Withdrawals Are Increasing

Not only has the number of amendments to environmental agreements steadily decreased, but recent years have also witnessed a sharp rise in country withdrawals. In 2020 alone, a record 18 withdrawals were recorded—more than four times the annual average observed between 2000 and 2019.

Pollution Remains a Key Theme

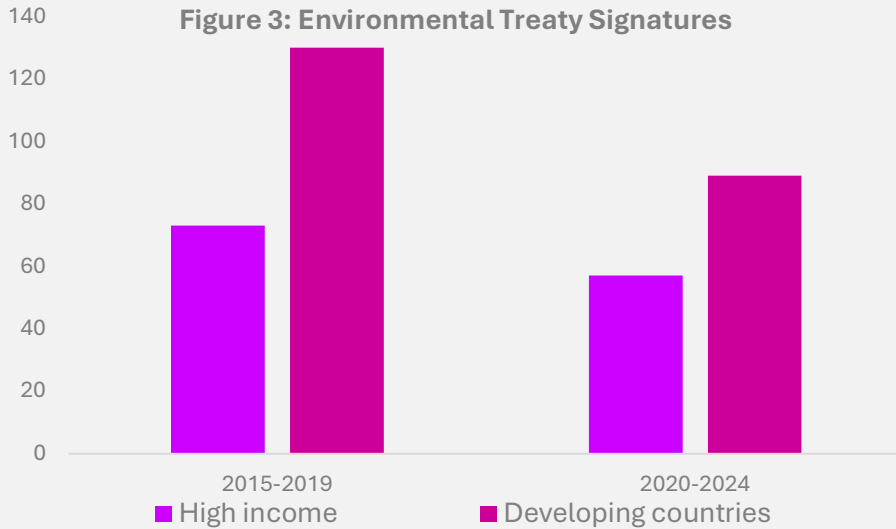
Despite the overall decline in both the number and diversity of international environmental agreements, the number of agreements specifically addressing pollution increased by 57%. Between 2015 and 2019, 7 pollution-related agreements were concluded, averaging 1.4 agreements per year. In contrast, the 2020–2024 period saw 11 pollution-related agreements, with an average of 2.2 per year. This trend suggests a renewed focus on pollution, even as broader environmental cooperation slows as shown in Figure 3.

Topic of Environmental Agreements Signed (2015-2022)



How Economic Contexts Influence Environmental Cooperation

Environmental agreements are not primarily driven by rich countries. Developing countries conclude more environmental agreements than high income countries, presumably because of their particularly high vulnerability to environmental challenges (IPCC, 2022, p. 12). Between 2020 and 2024, the number of low- and middle-income countries (as classified by the World Bank) signing environmental agreements was 54% higher than that of high-income countries.



An economic distinction is also evident when comparing ratifications of environmental agreements between 2015 and 2024. Several countries with the highest number of ratifications are low- and middle-income countries, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This suggests that some developing countries are catching up in their number of ratified environmental agreements.

Conclusion

The adoption of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) in 2023, appears to be more of an exception than a sign of renewed multilateral momentum, in a context where environmental treaty making continues to decline. Several factors may explain this shift, including negotiation fatigue due to the proliferation of existing agreements, the diversity of issues addressed, and the complexity inherent in reaching consensus. In light of these challenges, it becomes relevant to explore alternative forms of environmental action, such as regional initiatives, domestic policies, or collaborations involving private actors.

The current trend in environmental treaties may reflect a strategic shift toward alternative modes of governance, rather than a simple decline in commitment. This possibility warrants further analysis to better understand the evolving nature of international environmental cooperation.

References

IPCC. (2022). *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press.
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