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Climate Mainstreaming in Environmental Treaties

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Summary

Are climate treaties, like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or the Paris Agreement, the only way forward for intergovernmental climate cooperation? By now, there are hundreds of multilateral treaties governing a wide range of environmental issues, including energy, freshwater, oceans, air pollution, biodiversity conservation, hazardous waste, agriculture and fisheries. This policy brief examines whether the 379 multilateral environmental treaties that do not primarily address climate change can nevertheless contribute to advancing climate commitments.

We find that decisions adopted under environmental treaties have increasingly mainstreamed climate considerations since 1990. Today, climate-related decisions account for around 10% of regulatory decisions adopted under environmental treaties across different issue areas. Some treaty regimes are particularly active in addressing climate change, such as those focused on energy, freshwater and habitats, with up to 60% of their decisions addressing climate change. In contrast, treaties regulating agriculture and fisheries demonstrate a notably lower level of engagement in climate mainstreaming.

These findings demonstrate that environmental treaties that do not specifically focus on climate change can still contribute to shaping climate governance, albeit to varying degrees. This policy brief concludes with a set of recommendations for researchers, treaty negotiators, secretariats, governments and climate activists seeking to advance intergovernmental cooperation on climate change through means other than climate treaties.

Key policy messages:

Non-climate-focused treaties can serve as a means for developing climate mitigation and adaptation commitments, notably through decisions adopted by their respective bodies. Yet, there is room for increased climate mainstreaming in those decisions. Various actors can contribute to such mainstreaming:

- Researchers could further investigate why some conferences of the parties (COPs) are more receptive to climate concerns than others and what potential trade-offs are associated with climate mainstreaming in environmental treaties.
- Treaty negotiators can favour cross-cutting mandates that enhance policy coherence across interconnected environmental challenges, enabling a more integrated approach to environmental decision-making. They can also design dynamic collective bodies, able to adopt decisions swiftly when new issues or information arise.
- Governments can appoint climate experts in non-climate COPs and advisory committees and report climate-related aspects of their implementation of non-climate treaties.
- Treaty secretariats can coordinate joint initiatives and promote knowledge exchange across climate and other environmental regimes.
- Climate activists can intensify their engagement with non-climate COPs by participating in consultations, submitting position papers, and collaborating with sympathetic delegates to amplify the climate relevance of treaty decisions.

Introduction

Considering that the clock is ticking for implementing ambitious climate action, one would expect the international community to be increasingly active in combating climate change. However, intergovernmental climate cooperation appears to be in decline. Few climate treaties have been concluded since the Paris Agreement in 2015 (Veilleux & Morin, 2025). Furthermore, UNFCCC conferences of the parties (COPs) have been criticised, notably for the ability of a few countries with vested interests to stall negotiations. In this context, is there a way forward for intergovernmental climate cooperation?

Climate treaties may not be the only way to develop new climate commitments at the intergovernmental level. There are hundreds of multilateral environmental treaties (with three parties or more) addressing a wide range of environmental issues. On the one hand, climate treaties are a subset of environmental treaties that primarily focus on addressing climate change. Multilateral climate treaties include the *UNFCCC*, the *Kyoto Protocol*, the *Paris Agreement*, and the *Agreement Establishing the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre*. On the other hand, environmental treaties are agreements that have as "one of their primary purposes to manage or prevent human impacts on natural resources; plant and animal species (including in agriculture); the atmosphere; oceans; rivers; lakes; terrestrial habitats; and other elements of the natural world that provide ecosystem services" (IEADB, 2025; Mitchell al., 2020). *The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora* and *The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer* are examples of non-climate environmental treaties.

At least 383 of all environmental treaties have established a COP or a similar collective body that enables their parties to adopt decisions (Morin et al., 2022). Decisions adopted by these COPs, even under the 379 multilateral environmental treaties not primarily focused on climate, could potentially advance climate commitments. This policy brief explores this possibility by examining how climate considerations are being mainstreamed in decisions adopted under non-climate environmental treaties.

If non-climate environmental treaties generate climate-related decisions, it would imply that the range of instruments for intergovernmental cooperation on climate change is broader than previously assumed. Intergovernmental climate cooperation could potentially be cultivated in environmental institutions that do not solely focus on climate change. Moreover, COP decisions offer the benefit of being easier to achieve politically and are dynamic due to their high frequency.

We draw on a unique dataset of all 19,457 regulatory decisions adopted from 1945 to 2025 under the 379 multilateral environmental treaties that do not primarily address climate change and have the institutional mechanism to adopt decisions. These decisions were collected manually by browsing all the resolutions, recommendations, declarations, arrangements, rules, guidelines and decisions adopted by the collective bodies of these treaties. We then analysed the text of these decisions to assess whether they addressed climate change. Using a set of keywords (see Box 1), we conducted a word-occurrence analysis to distinguish between climate-related and non-climate-related decisions. We define "climate decisions" as those that contain at least two occurrences of climate-related keywords. We do not distinguish between decisions that include concrete measures to address climate change and those that acknowledge the issue in general. Hence, we define climate mainstreaming as the integration of climate-change adaptation or mitigation in the commitments, measures or considerations of a decision.

Box 1: Climate keywords

climate change; global warming; climate crisis; greenhouse gas; greenhouse gases; carbon neutrality; net zero; carbon dioxide; dioxide emission; climatic change; greenhouse effect.

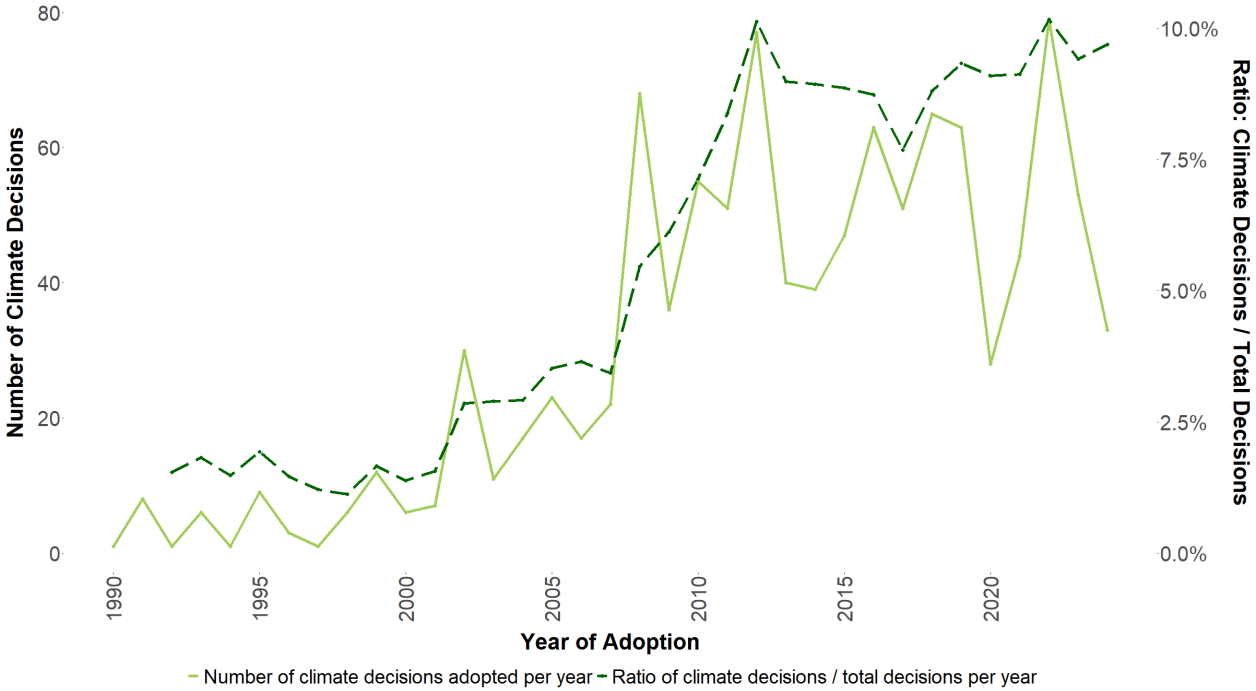
Climate mainstreaming since 1990

While the number of climate decisions adopted under non-climate treaties was close to zero in the early 1990s, it has steadily increased since the early 2000s (see Figure 1). The proportion of climate decisions relative to the total number of decisions adopted each year has also increased over the same period. After a slight decrease from 2010 to 2015, the ratio started to rise again around 2017. The adoption of the Paris Agreement may have contributed to this trend by recentring climate change at the forefront of international considerations. In 2024, climate decisions made up 9.7% of all decisions adopted by the COPs of environmental treaties, excluding the UNFCCC and other climate-specific treaties. This significant rise demonstrates the increased salience of climate change, as well as the growing concern it generates. Parties to a wide range of environmental treaties are increasingly integrating climate considerations into their collective decision-making processes.

Variations across issue-areas

There are interesting variations in the share of climate decisions, depending on the primary environmental issue-area addressed by the treaties. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the share of climate decisions relative to the total number of decisions adopted across different issue-areas. While there is a general increase in climate decisions across all environmental areas, the rise is particularly pronounced among energy treaties, especially since 2015. This may be explained by the role of fossil fuels in the energy sector and their contribution to the climate crisis. Calls to phase out fossil fuels may have reached energy-focused treaties, prompting them to integrate climate considerations into their decisions, whether symbolically or substantively.

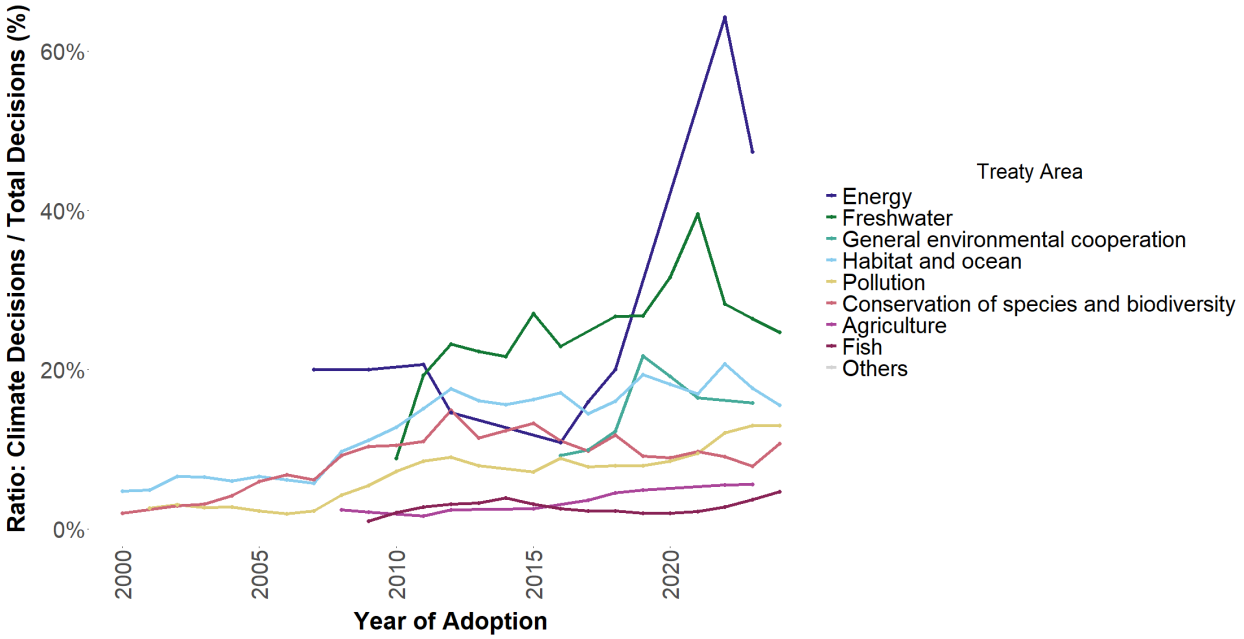
Figure 1: Evolution of the adoption of climate decisions



Notes: The graph illustrates the evolution of the number of climate decisions adopted annually by all non-climate environmental treaties (solid light green line) as well as the evolution of the share of climate decisions among total decisions adopted each year (dotted dark green line).

Source: Authors

Figure 2: Adoption of climate decisions per treaty area



Notes: The graph shows the evolution of the ratio of climate decisions on total decisions adopted annually for all environmental treaties in each issue area.

Source: Authors

For example, the *Energy Charter Treaty* adopted a decision in 2012 recommending that Lithuania improve conditions for renewable energy development, considering its potential to replace traditional energy sources and address climate change. The same decision also highlighted Kazakhstan's reliance on coal in its electricity sector and urged the country to promote the development of renewable energy sources to meet its international commitments on climate change mitigation. This example illustrates how decisions within the energy sector can contribute to shaping climate governance.

Freshwater treaties, which provide regulatory protection for lakes and rivers, have also experienced a sharp increase in the share of climate decisions, while habitat and ocean-focused treaties have the longest history of climate decisions. A possible explanation for these trends lies in the interrelation between climate change and the ecosystems targeted by these treaties, as the former has important consequences on the latter. This is noticeable in a decision adopted in 2023 by the COP of the *Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, titled the "Updated Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage". This decision recognises climate change as one of the most significant threats to World Heritage, due to its potential impacts on the integrity and authenticity of sites with "Outstanding Universal Value". It recommends that climate change be considered in the nomination of properties to the World Heritage List and that nominated sites benefit from a climate-management plan. It also encourages states to "maximise the 'signalling' value and inspirational power of World Heritage properties to showcase 'win-win' mitigation practices that both reduce greenhouse gases and safeguard Outstanding Universal Value" (UNESCO, 2023, p. 14). This decision illustrates that climate-change mitigation and adaptation have become a growing concern across a wide range of environmental regimes.

General environmental cooperation and pollution treaties have followed a similar trend: a growing share of their decisions address climate change, with the former having the shortest history of climate mainstreaming and the latter having one of the longest. Contrastingly, we observe a downward trajectory for the biodiversity treaties.

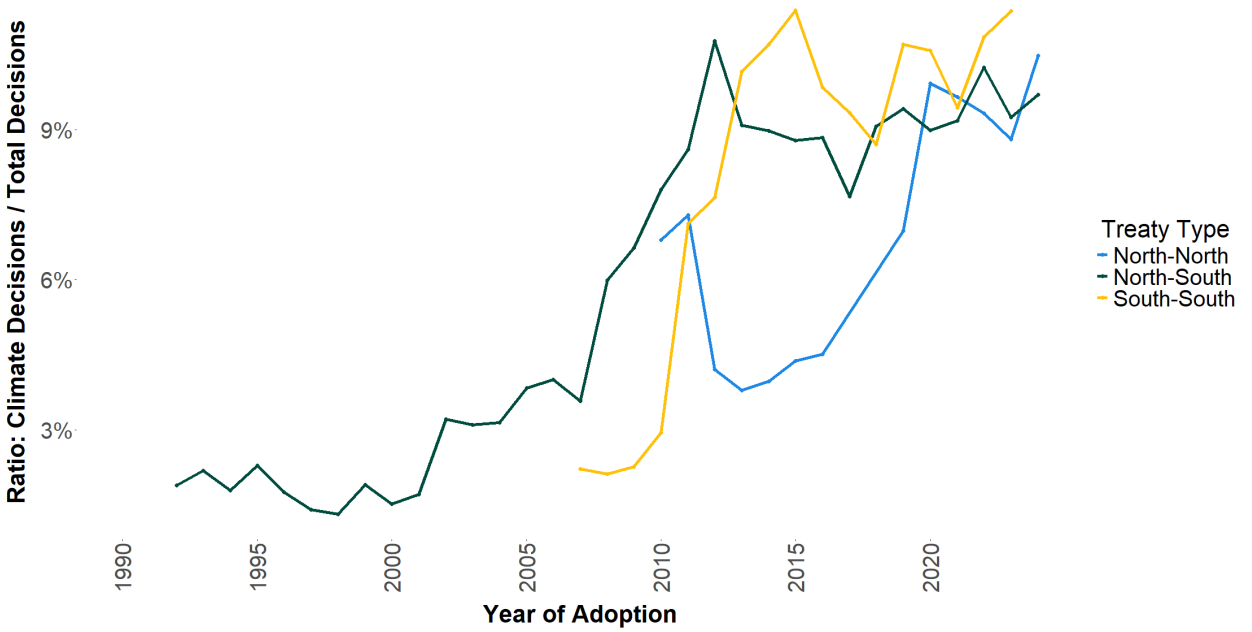
Despite the growing calls to integrate two closely related issues – climate and biodiversity – a decreasing share of decisions adopted under biodiversity treaties have addressed climate change since 2010, which appears counterintuitive.

Surprisingly, treaties regulating the agricultural and fisheries sectors have adopted only a marginal number of climate decisions. Given that agriculture accounts for roughly 20% of total anthropogenic emissions, with aquaculture and fisheries contributing around 10% of that share, and that these sectors are particularly vulnerable to climate change (Mbow et al., 2019), one might have expected the collective bodies of treaties in these two areas to engage more actively in climate mainstreaming.

Geographical variations

The adoption of climate decisions also varies depending on the countries that are part of the environmental treaties. COPs of treaties with North–South participation began adopting climate decisions in the early 1990s, 15 years before South–South treaties and nearly 20 years before North–North treaties. This gap is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the evolution of the share of climate decisions relative to the total number of decisions adopted annually by each treaty type.

Figure 3: Adoption of climate decisions per treaty type



Notes: The graph displays the evolution of the share of climate among total decisions adopted each year by each treaty type. A treaty type is determined by its members: North–North, North–South, and South–South.

Source: Authors

COPs of North–South treaties may have been early adopters of climate decisions due to the global distribution of climate impacts and responsibilities. The Global South has historically been more impacted by climate change, while the Global North bears greater historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions. In 1991, one year before the adoption of the UNFCCC, parties to the *Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission* adopted a decision reflecting the notion of shared but differentiated responsibilities. With this decision, the Commission urged its member states to support a system for assessing anthropogenic changes in the oceans, based on the means at their disposal. It also asked them to establish partnerships with developing countries to help them monitor and predict the impacts of climate change on oceans and coastal areas, considered a prerequisite for their adaptation policies. As seen in Figure 3, it was in 2020 that all three types

of environmental treaties began adopting similar shares of climate-related decisions.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

This policy brief shows that, since 1990, an increasing number of COPs have incorporated climate change into their decisions. The growing mainstreaming of climate considerations in environmental treaties' decision-making suggests that climate-focused treaties are not the only avenue for advancing climate commitments. Intergovernmental progress in climate mitigation and adaptation is not limited to the UNFCCC or the Paris Agreement. It can also be achieved through more dynamic means, such as COP decisions rather than formal treaties, and by a diverse range of institutions within global environmental governance. These interactions between climate change and other environmental issues can be strategically leveraged to foster intergovernmental climate action and generate new climate commitments.

Research on COP decisions and climate mainstreaming in non-climate treaties remains limited. Based on our findings, we identify two future research needs to improve our understanding of climate mainstreaming in environmental treaties. First, the research community should further investigate why some COPs are more receptive to climate concerns than others. This could inform scholars about what makes COPs more or less prone to address new issues and take action on such matters. Second, researchers could further analyse the implications of policy coherence between climate change and other environmental issues by exploring, for example, the possible trade-offs or conflicts between these priorities.

Our findings also have implications for global governance, as more attention needs to be paid to the role of non-climate institutions in addressing climate change. There appears to be room for further mainstreaming of climate change in non-climate environmental regimes. Several measures can contribute to this:

1. Treaty negotiators can favour cross-cutting mandates, promoting policy coherence across environmental issues. While several recent environmental treaties involving a large number of parties appear to be sensitive to policy coherence, some treaties from an earlier generation were framed in a more siloed manner and could benefit from amendments that enlarge their environmental scope.
2. Treaty negotiators can also design dynamic collective bodies able to adopt decisions swiftly when new issues or information arise. Measures that might favour such institutional dynamism include mandatory regular meetings, flexible adoption procedures, a well-resourced secretariat, and the existence of advisory subcommittees.
3. Governments can appoint climate experts in non-climate COPs and advisory committees. These experts will likely broaden the scope of discussions to include climate considerations. Governments can also include climate-related aspects in their annual implementation reports to non-climate treaties. This would enable the secretariat to compile information on climate-related measures.
4. Treaty secretariats can coordinate joint initiatives and promote knowledge exchange across regimes. Several secretariats of large multilateral environmental treaties already cooperate formally and informally. However, smaller regional secretariats appear to operate more independently and could benefit from being integrated into climate-related networks.
5. Climate activists can intensify their engagement with non-climate COPs by participating in consultations, submitting position papers, and collaborating with sympathetic delegates to amplify the climate relevance of treaty decisions. There remain significant gains to be made by raising awareness about the climate dimensions of environmental issues that do not seemingly appear to be climate-related.

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