The Global Forum

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Turning Words into Action

Designing Accountability Mechanisms with Impact for Multilateral Environmental Agreements

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Abstract

States join many multilateral environmental agreements, but lack of enforcement hinders their effectiveness and implementation. Even when science shows the gravity of the environmental degradation and solutions are available, the political will is lacking. When trust is lacking, accountability mechanisms can help establish trust. This Global Forum brief offers insights into the conditions under which accountability mechanisms can strengthen the implementation of multilateral environmental agreements, depending on whether states are driven by power, interest, identity, practice, or lack of capacity. We explore accountability mechanisms that in their design enable learning on how to address complex problems, as well as building capacity for addressing them, including shared, broad, and dynamic accountability. Recommendations are offered

for two categories of impactful accountability mechanisms: those aimed at creating incentives and those aimed at enabling learning. Both are relatively easy wins, yet they are likely to face substantial resistance from states concerned about the erosion of their power and sovereignty.

Keywords

trust – accountability – multilateral environmental agreements – institutional design – global environmental governance

1 Introduction

Words are powerful. Words can, based on content, context and purpose, hurt or heal in any relationship. Words have creative—or destructive—potential in any human community; they express ideas that can change the world, whether the small world in your neighborhood or the large world of our international community. The current world order is to a significant extent based on words captured in treaties—the UN Charter and countless treaties for issues of regional or global concern such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Whether legally binding (treaties) or non-legally binding (declarations and other 'soft law'), negotiating a common basis for action in the form of words on paper has been a major tool that sovereign states have used for addressing transboundary problems. The challenge lies in implementation. Notably, the Summit of the Future in 2024 called for strengthened accountability mechanisms to make sure commitments are realized.

'The environment' is a primary example. For good reason, it has been the subject of over 500 multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) in the last half-century.[1] The environment, the land under our feet, water in our lakes, rivers and oceans, the air we breathe, and all the life that these ecosystems harbor have suffered severe degradation as humanity has excelled in (ab)using its resources for more than basic needs—turning the planet into a mine and dumping ground for continuous materially based (unequal) growth—and the MEAs have not reversed this. A very urgent and clear example of that is the implementation of the Paris Agreement through its internal 'collective

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1 Club des Juristes 2015.

accountability mechanism,' the first iteration of which should be concluded by the upcoming COP30 in Brazil in November 2025. At COP30, we will know whether the revised national climate plans, legally required to be informed by the outcome of the first global stocktake, show that states remain far from meeting critical objectives such as limiting the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. At COP30, countries also have to agree on any modifications of the stocktake process ahead of its second iteration that starts in 2026.

At the very least, the scientific progress in understanding the negative impacts on the environment of material growth has kept pace with the advancements that enabled the extractive-based growth. We have extensive knowledge of what we are doing to the planet and its inhabitants captured in words in multiple assessment reports.[2] We also know a great deal about mitigating and even reversing the negative impact of environmental degradation, as documented in the same assessments and countless other publications. Moreover, we have numerous MEAs, crafted through careful negotiation, explicitly intended to translate this knowledge into state action and achieve the treaties' long-term objectives.

These objectives include 'holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C' of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (PA),[3] and the 'conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources' of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).[4] However, the words in these MEAs are clearly not powerful enough because the degradation continues. One significant reason is states' moderate compliance with their legal obligations and much lower implementation of their non-legal (moral) obligations under these treaties.[5] There are no mechanisms for enforcement, and faced with other priorities and interests, the political will and/or resources for action are lacking.

When the power of words is downplayed and made the plaything of the powerful, it is even more important to make words count. We need to bring truth and trustworthiness back to where they belong, as instruments for turning words into action, not the least the words agreed by states in treaties aiming to protect humanity's only habitat and home. This is no easy task as it could be

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2 IPCC 2023; IPBES 2019.
3 United Nations 2015, Article 2(a).
4 United Nations 1992, Article 1.
5 Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Dahl 2025.

seen as involving a major cultural shift in the current world order towards a stronger rule of international law, one that serves the common interest of all.[6] In this article, we look at the potential role of accountability and in particular accountability mechanisms within MEAs to support such a cultural shift, and make their words count more than they do today. We explore the role of accountability in building trust, discuss the design of effective accountability mechanisms, and offer recommendations to states on strengthening accountability, particularly within the MEAs to which they are party.

2　　　　　In the Absence of Trust—Rely on Accountability?

A trustworthy actor holds itself to account by the standards of that virtue.[7] Klabbers indeed argues that this is a tangible option of enabling accountability in a context where there are few other (legal) means for holding individuals to account. He argues for this option, particularly for public officials serving in international organizations, who could be expected to be associated with particularly important virtues for the exercise of their role and could hold themselves to account against their own virtue ethics. In many societies, however, institutions are established on the underlying assumption that actors (individual or collective) may not consistently embody this virtue. Mechanisms are therefore designed to enable one actor—or multiple actors within a forum—to hold others to account for adhering to agreed standards of behavior, provided their relationship allows or requires such oversight. Through such 'accountability mechanisms,' one actor feels obliged to justify its actions, and if deemed insufficient or undesirable may face negative consequences.[8] Well-known examples in national democratic governance are the ability of the parliament to oust a (head) of government who has broken important rules, or the ability of citizens to elect a new government when a previous one has failed in its promises.[9] For every citizen living in a state characterized by the rule of law, the courts of the land provide the mechanism to hold them to account when they break that law, and deliver a punishment.

In the realm of global governance, alongside customary international law, states are subject to laws that they have voluntarily negotiated and agreed to adopt. As treaties are negotiated through consensus, every participating

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6　Groff and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen 2018.
7　Klabbers 2014.
8　Mashaw 2006.
9　Bovens 2007.

state *de facto* has a veto against including provisions it does not agree with. Those same states, the primary actors, are urged by countless declarations— declarations they themselves negotiated—to pursue specific goals and targets. However, many MEAs lack explicit mechanisms to hold individual states accountable for non-compliance, mechanisms that could impose tangible consequences for insufficient action.[10] If there are any mechanisms that at least conceptually could be regarded as arenas for accountability, they are only facilitative, excluding any types of sanctions. Moreover, these mechanisms are also often collective, when all parties to the agreement engage in some form of collective self-accountability. The PA and CBD are primary examples of this approach.

The Implementation and Compliance Committee of the PA is only facilitative, aiming to enable and support, not sanction.[11] The PA also includes obligatory biannual reporting on implementation by states followed by technical expert reviews of those reports and 'facilitative multilateral consideration of progress.'[12] The obligatory reports on implementation under the CBD are, in contrast, not reviewed by experts, nor are they used for any country-based scrutiny; they are only bundled into synthesis reports by the Secretariat. The collective 'accountability mechanism,' though never referred to as such, under the two treaties consists of a global stocktake (PA) or global review (CBD), based on extensive input of information on progress on implementation. These stocktakes/reviews are then intended to give signals to states for formulating their next national plans, including both national ambition levels (targets) and implementation strategies. When global evaluations of progress reveal that actions fall far short of meeting the collective goals of an agreement—as seen in the first global stocktake of the Paris Agreement, which acknowledged 'the need for deep, rapid and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in line with 1.5 °C pathways,'[13]—each Party to the agreement *shall* (under the PA) or *may* (under the CBD) use the outcome to inform the revision of its next action plans.[14] This process can be understood as a form of self-accountability against a globally agreed standard. While the result of the first round of national self-accountability under the PA is not yet clear at the time of writing, as ninety-five percent of countries failed to submit their next climate plan by the deadline

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10   Brunnée 2003.

11   United Nations 2015.

12   See https://unfccc.int/FAQ-moving-towards-the-ETF#__-Reporting-Review-and-FMCP-tools

13   UNFCCC 2024.

14   United Nations 2015; CBD 2022.

10 February 2025,[15] it is unlikely to be very encouraging. The political winds are in many countries blowing against ambitious climate action.[16] This will provide a big test of the impact of the PA's collective accountability mechanism.

These two examples illustrate the need for stronger accountability and compliance mechanisms within the multilateral system and the UN, as emphasized by the Summit of the Future. This is crucial for ensuring commitments are kept and for restoring trust in global institutions.[17] Earlier draft versions of the Pact for the Future also included an explicit focus on strengthening global environmental governance,[18] as had been recommended by the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), but it did not survive the negotiations.[19]

3   Designing Impactful Accountability Mechanisms

How can we determine the conditions for accountability mechanisms to potentially strengthen implementation under/for multilateral (environmental) agreements? And which of these conditions can be influenced by appropriate design of the mechanisms themselves? Answering these questions requires an understanding of the diverse factors that drive the behavior of states in relation to that of other states and in relation to international law. Obviously, diverse and contextually dependent factors come into play. Here, we can only briefly sketch five broad categories of factors, each of which gives important guidance for what is required of an accountability mechanism to have substantive impact.[20]

Driven by power: When states care predominantly about (expanding) their own power, they only sign agreements and act under agreements in ways that support their power-maximizing agenda. They would have no interest in developing impactful accountability mechanisms.

Driven by interest: When states sign agreements based on their short- or long-term interests, accountability mechanisms that could change their cost-benefit

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15   https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-95-of-countries-miss-un-deadline-to-submit-2035-climate-pledges/
16   Furita and Bromley 2025.
17   United Nations 2024, para 38(a).
18   Ponzio and Yusuf 2024.
19   High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB) 2023.
20   These categories are drawn from international relations theories (see Raustiala 2000), and are described in more detail in Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Dahl 2025.

TABLE 1   Conditions for accountability mechanisms to potentially strengthen implementation

Driver/mechanism	Coercive		Facilitative	
	Supranational/ outside MEAs	Incentive based	Enabling learning	Providing capacity
Power	x			
Interest	x	x		(x)
Interests & identity	x	(x)	x	
Willing but unable			x	x
Change by doing	(x)	(x)	(x)	(x)

Note: The table lists conditions for when diverse types of accountability mechanisms can influence state behavior. The x indicates the possibility of an accountability mechanism influencing implementation positively, an (x) indicates an even more tentative possibility. In reality, several conditions will coexist for a particular state at a particular time in relation to a specific MEA. ADAPTED FROM KARLSSON-VINKHUYZEN AND DAHL 2025, *STIMSON CENTER*. RETRIEVED FROM: HTTPS://GGIN.STIMSON.ORG/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/2025/06/BRIEF_OPTIONS-FOR-STRENGTHENING-ACCOUNTABILITY-MECHANISMS-IN-GLOBAL-ENVIRONMENTAL-GOVERNANCE_MAY30-1.PDF.

calculations, either with material (e.g., economic) or non-material sanctions or rewards (e.g., reputation, finance, capacity building), would have impact.

Driven by interest and identity: When states' interest evolves as they gain new insights and when they care about doing the right thing (i.e., what is seen as legitimate), accountability mechanisms that provide new insights and learning could lead to more action.

Motivated but hindered by lack of capacity: When states want to act in line with their international obligations but lack sufficient capacity to do so, accountability mechanisms that identify and provide resources that are lacking (such as political, financial or technical capacity), can have an impact.

Driven by practice: When states engage in processes that 'pull' them to do things, for example, by socialization into joint practices, they may change their ways, and get used to doing it.[21]

Table 1 summarizes our analysis of what drives state behavior and the conditions under which accountability mechanisms might strengthen state action.

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21   Pouliot 2020.

It is hard to imagine any accountability mechanisms for MEAs that can influence states primarily driven by power. There are a variety of formal or informal accountability mechanisms through which peers (other states), public institutions (international or national) or civil society (domestic or transnational) could influence interest-based states such as through reputational sanctions.[22] Global accountability mechanisms for existing MEAs largely focus on facilitation, as seen with the examples of the PA and CBD. These could potentially pull countries driven by identity into more action, but we do not know yet if their current design contributes to learning that leads to more ambition and action. All these mechanisms require willing, capable, and resourceful account holders.

In summary, the main options for potential impact under current institutional designs, or improvements based on current designs, lie with states that have an interest in the objectives of the treaty and are open to learning and support, when provided. Importantly, we should not look at such mechanisms as being relevant only for developing countries. While these countries openly proclaim their need for capacity in various forms, clearly no state has found the level of ambitious climate or biodiversity action that would be needed to achieve the targets of the PA or the CBD. Even with strong political will, these complex issues permeate most societal sectors. We thus propose that considerable learning is also needed in/among developed countries.

Our analysis suggests that without the option of coercive mechanisms, effective accountability mechanisms must foster learning and capacity building to address complex problems. Literature suggests three approaches:[23]

1. Shared accountability (beyond formal) is based on ethical concern rather than only legal obligation and is linked to more widely shared responsibility;[24]

2. Broad accountability focuses on inputs (efforts), processes and outcomes, and thus monitoring and review should cover all these aspects, not only progress on (measurable) targets;

3. Dynamic accountability has learning as a major outcome, for example by enabling actors to reflect upon their behavior and strengthen their learning capacities.[25]

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22 Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al. 2018.
23 Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Dahl 2025.
24 Karlsson 2007; Wilkins 2002.
25 Schillemans et al. 2013.

While only the third approach explicitly mentions learning and capacity as an outcome, the first two approaches will also reinforce learning. Shared accountability would expand accountability mechanisms beyond those few legal and largely procedural obligations states have under MEAs, covering also the many 'encouraged' actions and their level of ambition. Broad accountability would provide much more information on efforts made, even when they fail, as a foundation for learning.

Building on this analysis, we can suggest ways to make the accountability mechanisms of multilateral agreements more impactful.

4   Recommendations for Stronger Accountability Mechanisms

In this section, we provide two categories of recommendations for stronger accountability mechanisms; those aimed at creating incentives and those aimed at enabling learning. These recommendations apply to all MEAs, especially the comprehensive ones addressing highly complex issues such as climate change and biodiversity. These, comparatively, are easier to implement, although they may still face significant resistance. We have previously provided recommendations for far-reaching accountability mechanisms that could also impact more power-driven states, or states having limited interest in achieving the objectives of MEAs.[26] We consider those long-term, deeper 'cultural' changes towards the rule of law at the international level important, but they will require a different geopolitical climate.

4.1   *Incentive Based Mechanisms*
We consider the following three avenues for making accountability mechanisms increase the incentives of states to do more for implementation as viable, and mutually supportive:

1. *Generate soft pressure for implementation and compliance through reputational sanctions and/or rewards from peer states, the UN, civil society, and domestic institutions.* Government action could be assessed within formal global follow-up mechanisms, by UN agencies, think tanks, scientists, or civil society. Domestic pressure can come from parliaments, audit agencies, media, business, and civil society.[27] Nonetheless, there is potential for actions at the international level. The convening power and

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26   Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Dahl 2025.
27   Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al. 2018.

moral authority of the UN Secretary-General could reward states taking on higher ambitions. Regional environmental rapporteurs on the model of the human rights system could monitor states' environmental policies relative to their international obligations.

2. *Create a process for states to self-allocate their fair share of responsibility for the collective goals set out in MEAs.* An independent global scientific advisory council composed of scientists and other knowledge holders representing all relevant disciplines in the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and indigenous and local knowledge would advise on the allocation of responsibilities among states, and on financial obligations. It would provide advocacy tools to hold individual governments to account whose ambitions are insufficient.

3. *Support institutions and resources to monitor states' implementation of international obligations.* A consortium of scientific institutions, think tanks, civil society organizations and UN agencies could produce shadow reports on the implementation of MEAs by individual countries, eventually becoming part of the official submissions under the MEA's reporting.

4.2   *Learning Mechanisms*

We provide four avenues for making accountability mechanisms to have input through enabling some degree of learning among states.

1. *Share accountability for analysis of states and other actors that frame the implementation of MEAs as their moral responsibility.* This goes beyond the legal obligations of MEAs to the moral (non-legal) obligations, such as taking on the highest possible ambition.

2. *Strengthen broad accountability by encouraging formal and informal account holders to monitor inputs, process, and outcomes*: how inclusive is the process to civil society and other stakeholders, whether it draws on both science and a broad knowledge base, and are outcomes just and equitable.

3. *Learn more from accountability mechanisms.* There is good practice in peer-to-peer learning, particularly among states in the same region.[28] There is a need to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies, and the processes through which they are developed, to learn and refine what works and what does not work in diverse contexts.

4. *Provide relevant capacity.* Reporting and administrative burdens can be reduced by simplifying and integrating reporting among closely related

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28   Lehtonen 2020; Ulloa and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen 2018.

treaties. Accountability mechanisms for financial and other means of implementation obligations should ensure more resources are available for countries where this is needed. Facilitative accountability mechanisms should direct tailor-made support to individual states for their implementation challenges.

5   Concluding Thoughts

Global governance needs significant improvement. Many proposals aim to modernize the UN and other global institutions to meet the interconnected and complex challenges of the twenty-first century, demanding systemic risk management.[29] We support many of these proposals and actively contribute to several initiatives reforming the UN Charter and core institutions of global environmental governance.[30] But institutional reforms will only be meaningful if the words of multilateral agreements are given more power, either through the internalization of trustworthiness among states and other actors or through the institutionalization of impactful accountability mechanisms.

In this Global Forum brief, we focused on multilateral environmental agreements, as environmental crises had become so urgent and severe that they appear to offer the most likely entry point for states to accept shared global responsibility, alongside the development of more effective accountability mechanisms. COP30 may test this. Existing institutions can only be judged when the words constituting them have been fully turned into action. States must come to recognize that their common interest requires giving up the consensus rule for some form of majority voting, and that they do have environmental responsibilities for which they should be held accountable in the interests of justice and equity.

If states continue to promise a better, more sustainable, just, and peaceful world through words after words in countless declarations and agreements, yet consistently fail to deliver, there may come a day when 'we the peoples' of the world will no longer consider multilateralism a legitimate enterprise. That can only lead to environmental catastrophe. However, we are convinced that by harnessing the creative power of words, supporting their intent, respecting the implied responsibilities, and translating them into action, we can avoid such a disastrous outcome.

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29   Studzinski et al. 2025.
30   Lopez-Claros et al. 2020; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Dahl 2021.

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