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# Future of International Cooperation Report 2025

Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress



Global Governance  
Innovation Network

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# *Future of International Cooperation Report 2025*

## Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress

By offering concrete proposals for innovating global and regional governance to promote and safeguard justice in all its dimensions, this report gives Doha Forum participants and concerned citizens and governments worldwide the tools to chart a course toward a more just, prosperous, and secure future for all.

Without bold and decisive action, acute injustices within and between countries risk undermining global stability and collective progress. This third edition of the *Future of International Cooperation Report* (FIC'25) focuses on how institutions and the practice of governance — operating at global and regional levels — can contribute to more just societies by protecting human rights, fostering inclusion, and leveraging innovation to bridge long-standing divisions. With a fresh analytical lens, and presenting foundational principles for effective global and regional governance, the report assesses the major challenges, threats, and opportunities for “justice in action” to be found in reforming political-judicial institutions, filling socioeconomic justice gaps, and advancing environmental justice. This November’s World Social Summit in Doha, and the follow-through to the 2024 Summit of the Future in New York and the recent Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Sevilla, offer unique roadmaps for government and non-governmental leaders committed to tackling the structural causes of injustice, including political and social exclusion, judicial corruption, extreme inequality, abject poverty, violence and insecurity, and an uninhabitable environment.

## RESEARCH TEAM AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# Foreword

While the promotion and safeguarding of justice globally have long played a central role in defining international cooperation's *raison d'être*, high levels of injustice across the planet — driven by underdevelopment, corruption, social exclusion, inequality, insecurity, and environmental degradation, among other factors — persist unabated. Responses often lack political and moral courage and vision, not only from national governments and international organizations, but from their partners across civil society and in the business community. Global and regional collective action are necessary to mobilize these actors to bridge and overcome the stark justice gap found today within and between countries. In this spirit, three sequential diplomatic, high-stakes global gatherings — the 2024 Summit of the Future, the recent Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and this November's World Social Summit in Doha — are both timely and critical.

In preparation for this year's Doha Forum on December 6th and 7th, the *Future of International Cooperation Report 2025* aims to better inform forum participants, policy-makers, and concerned citizens by addressing the role of global and regional cooperation in advancing justice. It does so by identifying three major spheres of human and national life, namely, the political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental domains. Under the theme "Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress," the report offers a unique analytical perspective and new principles, giving special attention to how building a more just and sustainable future requires rethinking governance, protecting human rights, fostering inclusive societies, and leveraging innovation to bridge long-standing divisions within communities, nations, regions, and the world. In doing so, it aspires to help participants of the 2025 Doha Forum to apply core principles of justice, including fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion, to the most pressing issues facing our planet. Indeed, both the forum and this report's focus on "diplomacy, dialogue, and diversity" matter, especially if the international community is to achieve genuine progress in the hard-fought struggle against injustice.

We wish to express our appreciation to the authors of this report, which represents the latest intellectual collaboration between the Doha Forum, the Stimson Center, and the Global Institute for Strategic Research (based at the Qatar Foundation's Hamad Bin Khalifa University). We hope it will inform a rich and open exchange at the upcoming Doha Forum and other international dialogues dedicated to promoting a more just, prosperous, and secure future for all. By rethinking the future of global and regional governance, alongside a broad, open approach to international cooperation that harnesses the ideas, networks, and capabilities of a diverse range of state-based and non-state actors, we can chart a more fulfilling and positive course to better respond to challenges, threats, and opportunities of the 21st century.

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# List of Abbreviations

AfCFTA.....	African Continental Free Trade Area
AfCHPR.....	African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights
AI.....	Artificial Intelligence
ASEAN.....	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU .....	African Union
COP30.....	2025 United Nations Climate Change Conference (30th Conference of the Parties)
FfD4.....	The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development
FIC'23.....	<i>Future of International Cooperation Report 2023</i>
FIC'24.....	<i>Future of International Cooperation Report 2024</i>
ESRC.....	Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ECHR.....	European Court of Human Rights
EU .....	European Union
G4 .....	Group of Four Countries: Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan (each mutually support each other's bids for permanent seats on the UN Security Council)
G20 .....	Group of Twenty Countries: intergovernmental forum comprising 19 countries, the African Union, and the European Union
GDP .....	Gross Domestic Product
GGIR.....	<i>Global Governance Innovation Report</i>
GGW.....	Great Green Wall (Africa)
IACtHR.....	Inter-American Court of Human Rights
ICC.....	International Criminal Court
ICJ.....	International Court of Justice (World Court)
IDB.....	Inter-American Development Bank
IGN .....	Intergovernmental Negotiations (on Security Council reform)
IMF.....	International Monetary Fund
LDC(s) .....	Least Developed Country(ies)
MENA.....	Middle East and North Africa Region
NGO .....	Nongovernmental Organization
OAS .....	Organization of American States
ODA.....	Official Development Assistance
OECD .....	The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
P5.....	Five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States)
RDB(s) .....	Regional Development Bank(s)
SDG(s) .....	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SOTF .....	Summit of the Future
UDHR .....	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN.....	United Nations
UNCTAD .....	United Nations Trade and Development (formerly "Conference")
HRC .....	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNSC.....	United Nations Security Council
UPR.....	Universal Periodic Review
WPS.....	Women, Peace, and Security



# Executive Summary

*“Where justice and order are not restored, there can be no healing, leaving violence and hatred ticking like a bomb in the corner. ... [We] must strengthen [our] commitment to the rule of law, not undermine it. These principles are part of our global moral and legal responsibility, not items from a menu we can choose only when it suits us.”*

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Laureate, Anti-Apartheid and Human Rights Activist, and Theologian<sup>1</sup>

Under the banner of “Diplomacy, Dialogue, and Diversity,” the Doha Forum has promoted for more than two decades a spirited and open interchange of ideas to innovate and improve international policy-making that drives action-oriented networks. Through this ***Future of International Cooperation 2025*** report, the Doha Forum, Stimson Center, and Global Institute for Strategic Research explore ways to maximize the generational opportunities provided by the convening of, and follow-through to, the September 2024 Summit of the Future, June-July 2025 Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and November 2025 World Social Summit. For these global diplomatic gatherings to achieve their full potential, action-oriented networks of governments, civil society, religious leaders, the media, the business community, and international organizations — both globally and regionally — are necessary for success.

With this year’s thematic focus on “**Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress**,” the report gives special attention to how global and regional governance can best promote and safeguard **justice in all its dimensions** (political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental). Without bold and decisive action, acute injustices within and between countries risk undermining global stability and collective progress. A more just and sustainable future requires rethinking governance, protecting human rights, fostering inclusive societies, and leveraging innovation to bridge these divides, including through the **Pact for the Future, Sevilla Commitment**, and the anticipated **Political Declaration** from the respective above-noted series of UN summits.

Clear, foundational principles are essential for realizing the full potential of justice in action in global and regional governance. Applied to efforts to reform political-judicial institutions, fill socioeconomic justice gaps, and advance environmental justice in global governance, these principles include ***fairness, representation, accountability, and freedom***. Within the domain of regional governance, where the report examines institutional, legal, policy, operational, and normative innovations across the three dimensions of justice, four closely related principles are emphasized: ***accessibility, inclusion and collaboration, local capacity development, and transparency***.

With the goal of making global and regional governance more effective and inclusive in promoting and safeguarding justice for present and future generations worldwide, the report’s chief recommendations include:

## GLOBAL JUST

### Global Justice in Action

#### ***Expand the ICJ and ICC’s Reach through Political Support, Compromissory Clauses, and Advisory Opinions***

International justice is under growing strain amid rising geopolitical tensions, selective compliance, and the erosion of global norms, underscoring the urgent need for renewed commitment and reform to deliver effective legal solutions through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International

Criminal Court (ICC). While the further development and defense of international law has taken a back seat at recent UN summits, it remains a vital facet of ensuring justice and remedy for major global issues. Alongside broader efforts to generate greater political support for the ICJ's compulsory jurisdiction (and the ICC's authorities too mandated through the Rome Statute), an appealing additional solution is to designate the International Court of Justice as arbiter of future summit-related international agreements. Tying jurisdiction to these instruments through such "compromissory clauses" would strengthen enforcement, because states could not reject judgments without repudiating the agreements themselves. The General Assembly should also (and the Secretary-General granted the same authority to) make greater use of ICJ advisory opinions to proactively clarify and develop international law.

### ***Bolster Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights through UN Human Rights Council Innovations***

Closing the socioeconomic justice gap requires implementing universal human rights with enforcement mechanisms that hold states and corporations accountable. The UN Human Rights Council has increasingly emphasized economic, social, and cultural rights (such as food, employment, education, and health), as well as highlighting issues like regressive taxation and illicit financial flows as structural injustices that impede their realization. Reforms to strengthen its promotion of these rights could include introducing a "compliance scorecard" in Universal Periodic Review sessions, adopting majority-voting for procedural decisions to prevent deadlock, linking human rights obligations to global fiscal governance through support for the UN Tax Convention now under negotiation, helping Member States effectively incorporate these rights into national laws and international agreements, and more closely engaging the Council with strengthened regional and national human rights bodies to facilitate greater regional and domestic action.

### ***Establish a United Nations Climate Change Council***

The world continues to face the existential triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. While key agreements like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Climate Agreement guide global climate action, an effective coordinating body is still urgently needed to streamline follow-on decision-making, connect across all three pillars of the crisis, and enforce implementation and compliance. The newly proposed UN Climate Change Council could ensure high-level representation from influential countries and meaningful participation by other relevant stakeholders on fundamental climate issues, directly supporting implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. A "Just Transition Review and Response" tool, for tracking progress and recommending corrective actions to help countries deliver better on their Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, and Global Stocktake, could aid the Council's work.

## **REGNL JUST**

## **Regional Justice in Action**

### ***Prioritize Issue-Specific Judicial Competencies and Training for Regional Human Rights Courts***

Regional human rights courts in Africa, the Americas, and Europe (and hopefully, someday in the Arab region and Asia too) play a critical role in advancing political and judicial justice by providing an additional layer of accountability and adjudication tools, especially when domestic institutions are weak, biased, or compromised. At the same time, strengthening their judicial competencies through issue-based training and continuous education on diverse topics, such as inequality, cybercrime, labor rights, discrimination in healthcare and education, and environmental justice, can improve the capacity of regional human rights courts to deliver fair and effective rulings. Specialized human rights bodies and officials would provide deeper expertise, promote more consistent jurisprudence, and expedite case resolution — ultimately strengthening access to justice within a regional context.

### ***Promote Pooled Regional Investment Funds through Regional Development Banks***

Persistent debt burdens and limited access to affordable finance remain major structural obstacles to achieving sustainable development in many developing countries. The creation of pooled regional investment funds through Regional Development Banks can promote investment in underfunded areas such as the informal economy, localized agricultural chains, and social services. Unlike traditional loans or grants, these funds offer equity investment to social enterprises, cooperatives, and communities supporting women-led informal cooperatives, Indigenous peoples, and youth-led green startups. Taking pooled regional investment funds to greater scale would enable fairer concessional financing, more responsive development cooperation (including through new social metrics like gender pay equity), and inclusion through greater community ownership.

### ***Strengthen Compliance Mechanisms in Regional Environmental Agreements***

Ensuring compliance remains a critical challenge to making regional environmental agreements effective and resilient in tackling the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. To facilitate greater accountability in their implementation, all regional environmental agreements should adopt enforceable compliance mechanisms. Specifically, this requires empowering regional compliance bodies to issue non-compliance findings, ensure public transparency, and recommend corrective actions. Additionally, linking treaty implementation to greater market access and climate finance eligibility would provide stronger incentives for compliance.

## **From the SOTF and FfD4 to the World Social Summit: Fighting Injustice Worldwide**

Building on the Summit of the Future (which addressed global governance gaps in the UN's core pillars of sustainable development, peace and security, and human rights) and the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (which tackled SDGs financing gaps identified by the Summit of the Future), this November's World Social Summit will advance efforts to eradicate poverty, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, and promote social integration. In championing the fight against injustice in all its dimensions, the three summits manifest various “win-win” linkages; in many ways, their respective success depends on the pursuit of deep and varied connections between them. Together, they are poised to take forward the **Pact for the Future**, the **Sevilla Commitment**, the anticipated **Political Declaration** of the World Social Summit, and many of the wider sets of themes covered at this year's Doha Forum, including in the areas of geopolitics, economic development, emerging technologies, cultural diplomacy, and security.

Several of the innovations for promoting and safeguarding justice through global and regional governance introduced in this report offer novel entry points for deepening the multiple, mutually reinforcing action agendas of the three successive summits culminating, in November 2025, in Doha. **Reducing high, avoidable levels of injustice** (and associated levels of inequality and underdevelopment) **requires political and moral courage and vision**, not only from national governments and international organizations, but from their partners across civil society and in the business community. By placing a spotlight on the global and regional collective action needed to bridge and overcome the stark justice gap found today within and between many countries, a more just — as well as safer, more prosperous, and sustainable — future for all can be realized.

# I. Introduction: Justice Unpacked, Trends, and Concepts

*“With ‘Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress,’ we reaffirm our mission to foster meaningful dialogue and drive transformative change. Our goal is to inspire collaborative solutions that make justice a tangible reality worldwide.”*

—Mubarak Ajlan Al-Kuwari, Executive Director, Doha Forum<sup>2</sup>

This year’s Doha Forum takes place on the heels of three historic intergovernmental and multistakeholder gatherings: this year’s (November 2025) World Social Summit in Doha, this year’s (June-July 2025) Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville, and last year’s (September 2024) Summit of the Future in New York. Through the *Future of International Cooperation Report 2025* (FIC’25), the Doha Forum, Stimson Center, and Global Institute for Strategic Research present a primer for Doha Forum participants, international policy-makers, journalists, and concerned citizens on the theme of “Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress.”

Without bold and decisive action, acute injustices within and between countries risk undermining global stability and collective progress. A more just and sustainable future requires rethinking governance, protecting human rights, fostering inclusive societies, and leveraging innovation — including at the levels of global and regional governance — to bridge these divides. Under the banner of “diplomacy, dialogue, and diversity,” the 2025 Doha Forum will address issues of geopolitics, economic development, emerging technologies, cultural diplomacy, and security, and, in effect, serve as a global platform for considering how to apply the power and principles of justice (across its rich political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions) to the most pressing issues facing our planet. Before delving deep into these themes, the FIC’25 report first unpacks the concept of justice for the modern world and presents a brief overview of global macrorends, as well as related key concepts and terminology.

## Unpacking Justice

The United Nations Charter’s preamble includes, among its four main aims, “to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained.”<sup>3</sup> That justice includes procedural and retributive justice — the formal institutions and processes of the judiciary (civil and criminal) that encompass courts, judges, records, prosecutors, defense counsel, jails, and prisons — is clear, but fair and effective adjudication is only a piece of the picture.<sup>4</sup> Another element is the informal dispute settlement and justice mechanisms found in most traditional societies, which may sometimes be more resilient than formal systems (e.g., during

protracted deadly conflicts) and may enjoy more local trust (especially when employing restorative justice techniques that focus on rehabilitating offenders through reconciliation with victims and the wider community).<sup>5</sup> A third core component is distributive justice: how society allocates and manages its resources.<sup>6</sup> In some war-torn states, the national allocation of monetary wealth — and land, and influence — may have been a principal cause of war.

Held dear in all cultures and traditions, conceptions of justice also vary between them. The Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has called for greater attention to how institutions of justice affect those they are supposed to serve, and for the focus of development cooperation to shift from institution-building to helping people and societies directly.<sup>7</sup> In his influential 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*, the American moral, legal, and political philosopher John Rawls addressed how fundamental rights and duties and “advantages from social cooperation” could be most fairly distributed in society.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Future of International Cooperation 2025*, justice is considered — and applied using real-world examples involving its promotion and safeguarding by global and regional governance bodies — across three major spheres of human and nation-state activity: political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental.

**Political-Judicial justice:** refers to the complex relationship between politics, power, and judicial systems, and how legal systems can be used to both uphold and challenge political authority.<sup>9</sup> It also means a fair voice for all parties in international decision-making and processes that adhere to the rules of international law. At the global level, better public dialogue and reasoning are encouraged, including by engaging civil society organizations and the global media in such discussions.<sup>10</sup>

**Socioeconomic justice:** defined as the fair distribution of economic opportunities and access to essential services and protections that allow people the right to live in dignity and security, regardless of their income, gender, nationality, or race.<sup>11</sup> It serves as a cornerstone for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among nations.<sup>12</sup> Socioeconomic justice requires addressing structural inequalities and ensuring that the benefits of development are shared inclusively across society.

**Environmental justice:** deals with how people and their communities identify and organize around the distribution of environmental hazards and resulting health deficits, and how they seek to reduce inequalities through positive legal and policy changes and broader efforts to improve both life and health.<sup>13</sup> It further calls for safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable, ensuring that environmental burdens and benefits are shared equitably, and promoting collective stewardship of the planet’s resources.<sup>14</sup>

In order to promote and safeguard justice, a comprehensive and integrated approach must be undertaken that respects its core principles ([figure 1.1](#)), including fairness, representation, accountability, and freedom, as well as accessibility, transparency, inclusion and collaboration, and local capacity development (each elaborated in [sections two](#) and [three](#) of this report, respectively, under “Revisiting Core Principles”). Together, these principles form the foundation for advancing a just and sustainable future through regional and global governance frameworks.

Amid today’s crisis of multilateralism (explored at length in this report), justice must be placed at the forefront to confront challenges of legitimacy and effectiveness. Global and regional governance agendas should harness these eight guiding principles around an innovative and integrated approach to justice, in order to guide states on a path that generates positive multiplier effects for their citizens and helps to



restore both states and citizens’ trust in the multilateral system. This moment calls for intense reflection on the future of global and regional governance. Achieving “justice in action” worldwide makes it useful and timely to fully leverage opportunities from the historic and closely linked 2024 Summit of the Future, 2025 Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and 2025 World Social Summit.

**Figure 1.1: Principles of Justice across Global and Regional Governance**



Source: Original Figure, Stimson Center.

## Global Backdrop

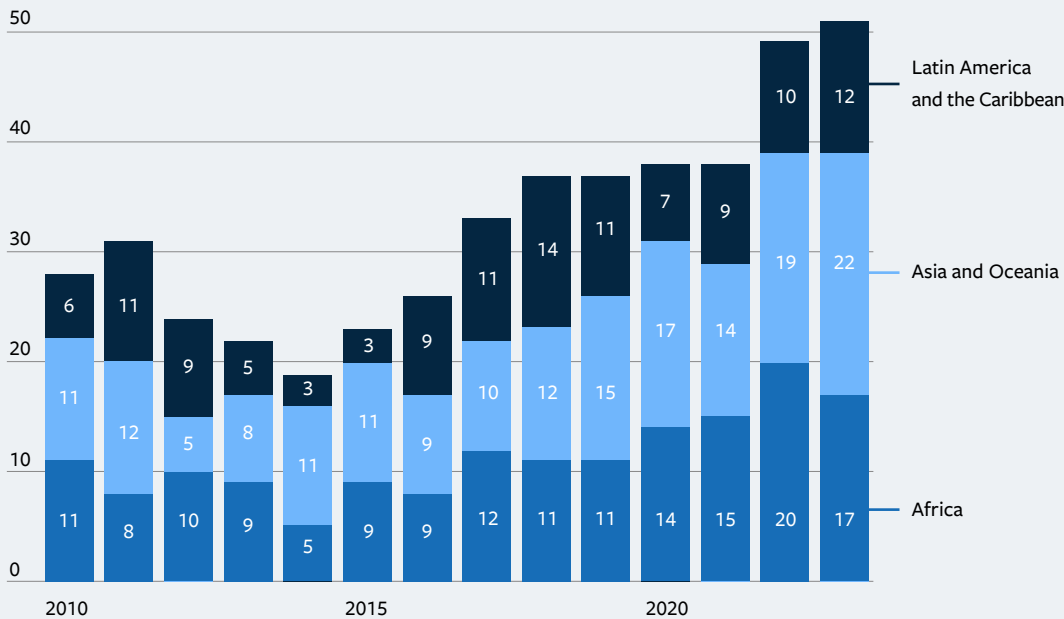
Underpinning the *Future of International Cooperation Report 2025* is an acknowledgement of four key global currents: socioeconomic development and recovery, peace and security, the environment, and technology. The convergence of the four currents is reflected in their alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the priorities of the Pact for the Future — initiatives whose progress have been significantly set back by a liquidity crisis at the United Nations (UN), declining foreign aid and waning multilateral cooperation, and escalating global conflicts. Their intersection is further evident in the interplay between socioeconomic development and the environment, where mounting global debt burdens constrain countries’ ability to effectively respond to the climate crisis and invest in protective

adaptation infrastructure. Meeting today’s challenges requires strengthened global and regional institutions that are both responsive and equipped to deliver effective solutions to present problems.

**SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND RECOVERY**

Developing countries face a growing socioeconomic crisis exacerbated by reduced international support and escalating debt burdens. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) projects a 9%-17% drop in Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2025, following a 9% decline in 2024, which is the first time in nearly 30 years that major donors like the U.S., France, and Germany have all cut ODA significantly.<sup>15</sup> This erosion of ODA is fueling 20%-40% financial shortfalls in some regions, where concessional finance remains the primary external resource.<sup>16</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) data shows the number of developing countries experiencing net debt outflows, paying more in servicing than they receive in new loans, has doubled in the past decade, hitting Africa, Asia and Oceania, and Latin America and the Caribbean especially hard (see figure 1.2). Least developed countries (LDCs) must stretch limited resources to sustain essential services, resulting in fewer teachers, reduced public health services, and stalled infrastructure projects.<sup>17</sup> Developing countries now hold \$31 trillion in public debt, growing at twice the rate of developed economies and often borrowing at interest rates up to four times higher.<sup>18</sup> While global hunger rates have declined slightly to 8.2% from 8.5% in 2023, progress is uneven, with rates rising in Africa and Western Asia.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 1.2: Number of Countries with Net Debt Outflows Doubled over the Last Decade**



Source: United Nations, *A World of Debt Report*, 2025.

Ongoing crises in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and across the wider Sahel continue to show little sign of resolution, diverting resources away from other pressing socioeconomic development priorities worldwide.<sup>20</sup> The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development underscored that redirecting even a fraction of global defense spending toward concessional finance, debt relief, and regional development banks could close critical funding gaps. Without a more inclusive international financial architecture and a fair debt resolution framework too, progress on health, education, and sustainable development more generally will continue to face enormous strain in many parts of the world.

## **PEACE AND SECURITY**

Global peace and security worsened in 2024, as ongoing conflicts and devastation in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and elsewhere continued to undermine global stability. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program observed 61 state-involved armed conflicts in 2024, the highest since records began in 1946.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, conflicts are increasingly internationalized, with the Global Peace Index 2025 reporting 78 countries engaged in cross-border disputes, complicating de-escalation efforts. Pathways to peace are also narrowing, as peace agreements dropped from 23% of conflict terminations in the 1970s to just 4% in the 2010s.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, military spending reached \$2.718 trillion in 2024 worldwide, a 9.4% surge and the steepest since the late Cold War (raising the global military burden to 2.5% of the world's aggregate GDP).<sup>23</sup> Nuclear-armed states alone spent more than \$100 billion on arsenals, up 11% from 2023.<sup>24</sup>

The human toll of conflict and climate change continues to rise, driving unprecedented displacement. By the end of 2024, forced displacement reached a record 123.2 million people, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees projecting further increases in 2025.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, multilateral crisis management is under immense pressure. In 2024, the UN Security Council vetoed seven draft resolutions, the highest annual total since 1986, highlighting deep geopolitical divisions and limiting collective responses to urgent crises.<sup>26</sup> Together, surging conflicts, militarization, mass displacement, and weakened multilateral safeguards have left the global peace and security landscape marked by war, inequity, and eroding collective protections.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

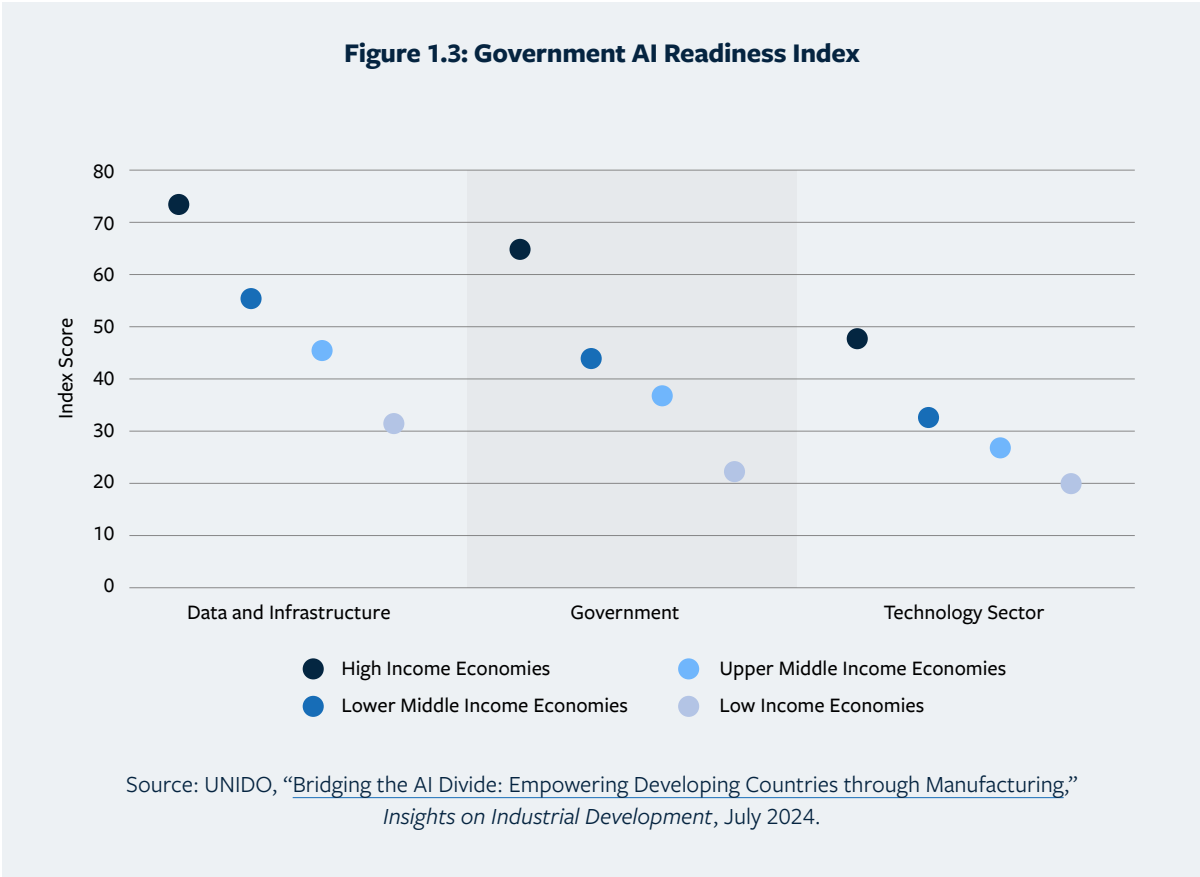
Environmental threats are intensifying across regions, heightening risks to human security, livelihoods, and equitable development. The world continues to face the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, with global temperatures reaching record highs in 2024. In 2024 alone, disasters triggered 45.8 million displacements, the highest annual total recorded for natural disasters and nearly double the average of the past decade. Over 60% occurred in low- or lower-middle-income countries, where inadequate infrastructure, weak preparedness, and high exposure to climate risks amplify vulnerability.<sup>27</sup> Impacts were particularly severe in South Asia, the Sahel, and Central America, where affected communities often lack formal protections against climate-induced displacement.

Despite growing vulnerability, international protections for climate-displaced persons remain undefined, and national adaptation plans often fail to reach Indigenous and frontline communities. At the same time, the green energy transition is intensifying demand for critical minerals — such as cobalt and lithium — driving extractive activity in fragile states and contributing to environmental degradation and rights abuses.<sup>28</sup> While the Climate COP29 marked a breakthrough with the operational launch of the Loss

and Damage Fund and a \$300 billion climate finance pledge as part of the New Collective Quantified Goal, countries also set a roadmap to mobilize \$1.3 trillion annually by 2035 to support climate action in developing countries. Despite these commitments, overall climate financing has shown signs of decline, and only 8% of international reconstruction finance between 2019 and 2021 was tagged as adaptation-related. The world’s most climate-vulnerable countries continue to receive a disproportionately small share of adaptation support, raising concerns over equity, access, and delivery.<sup>29</sup>

TECHNOLOGY

Technological change is advancing at an unprecedented pace, yet access and capacity remain deeply uneven. High-income economies drive innovation, while many developing countries struggle with limited infrastructure, weak digital ecosystems, and widening divides in artificial intelligence (AI).<sup>30</sup> A new form of inequality and global digital divide is fast emerging — not only in internet access, but in the capacity to build, govern, and deploy AI. The AI Readiness Index highlights this divide. As figure 1.3 shows, high-income economies score two-to-three times higher than low-income peers across infrastructure, governance, and private-sector capability. Beyond economic divides, the rapid diffusion of technology is also reshaping security dynamics. Non-state groups committing at least one drone attack per annum rose from 6 to 91 between 2018 and 2023, blurring the line between conventional and irregular warfare.<sup>31</sup>



Without major advances in computing power, regulatory frameworks, and innovation ecosystems, many countries risk being locked into downstream adoption rather than shaping AI development.<sup>32</sup> Regional initiatives, such as Latam-GPT’s Indigenous language support, Saudi Arabia’s Arabic Large Language Model, and new International Finance Corporation-backed data centers in Africa, signal efforts to close the gap, but momentum remains uneven.<sup>33</sup>

## Key Concepts in this Report

### JUSTICE

Held dear in all cultures and traditions, conceptions of justice also vary between them. The concept includes procedural and retributive justice — the formal institutions and processes of the judiciary (civil and criminal) that encompass courts, judges, records, prosecutors, defense counsel, jails, and prisons — but fair and effective adjudication is only a piece of the picture.<sup>34</sup> Another element is the informal dispute settlement and justice mechanisms found in most traditional societies, which may sometimes be more resilient than formal systems (e.g., during protracted deadly conflicts) and may enjoy more local trust (especially when employing restorative justice techniques that focus on rehabilitating offenders through reconciliation with victims and the wider community).<sup>35</sup> A third, core component is distributive justice: how society allocates and manages its resources.<sup>36</sup> In some war-torn states, the national allocation of monetary wealth — and land, and influence — may have been a principal cause of war.

### GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Global governance is essentially about the steering of institutions and resources to provide for global public goods and tackle global challenges effectively. Such steering requires not only power but also legitimacy and authority. Here, an emerging consensus becomes visible that for global governance to be legitimate and authoritative in contemporary terms, it needs to be conducted in an evidenced-based, inclusive, networked, equitable, and future-oriented way. Global governance innovation typically involves reform initiatives to advance global institutional, legal, policy, normative, and operational change.<sup>37</sup>

### REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

Regional governance refers to the institutions, mechanisms, and processes through which countries and other actors within a specific geographic region cooperate to address transboundary challenges, manage resources, and pursue common goals — often in such areas as economic development, security, human rights, environmental protection, and public health.<sup>38</sup> It typically involves formal organizations (e.g., the African Union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, European Union, and Organization of American States), as well as less formal arrangements (e.g., cross-border initiatives, policy dialogues, and regional forums). Regional governance can operate at various levels, including supranational, intergovernmental, or multistakeholder, and it often complements and bridges global and national governance efforts.



## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

Human rights are universal, inalienable, and indivisible rights that belong to every person by virtue of being human. They include civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights — such as the rights to life, liberty, equality, education, and health — and apply to all people without discrimination. Rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and international law, these rights must be respected, protected, and fulfilled by governments, while individuals also share a responsibility to uphold the rights of others.<sup>39</sup> The UDHR, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, sets out the fundamental human rights to be universally protected. Its 30 articles provide the principles and building blocks of current and future human rights conventions, treaties, and other legal instruments.<sup>40</sup>

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Accountability is the obligation of power holders to take responsibility for their actions, with public accountability forming a core principle of participatory and democratic governance. Social accountability encompasses the actions and mechanisms citizens, civil society, media, and state actors use to demand and support accountability — primarily from public officials, but also from private corporations, international institutions, and other organizations.<sup>41</sup>

## **FAIRNESS**

Fairness is the impartial and just treatment of people, decisions, and processes, ensuring that rights are respected, burdens and benefits are distributed equitably, and rules are applied consistently without bias or favoritism.<sup>42</sup>

## **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

Environmental justice deals with how people and their communities identify and organize around the distribution of environmental hazards and resulting health deficits, and how they seek to reduce inequalities through positive legal and policy changes and broader efforts to improve both life and health.<sup>43</sup> It further calls for safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable, ensuring that environmental burdens and benefits are shared equitably, and promoting collective stewardship of the planet's resources.<sup>44</sup>

## **LEGITIMACY**

Legitimacy refers to the acceptance and recognition of authority, particularly by a government or political system, by the governed population. Legitimacy is not just about power; it is about the people's belief in a force's right to exercise that power.<sup>45</sup> Several factors can contribute to legitimacy, including its effectiveness in meeting needs (like security, healthcare, and economic stability), its adherence to fair principles, and the extent to which it represents the values and interests of the population.<sup>46</sup> Legitimacy in global governance often refers to the perception that an institution's authority, actions, and influence are

appropriate, justified, and credible. For the United Nations, legitimacy is grounded in its legal foundation under the UN Charter, its broad membership of states, adherence to international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, impartiality, and its capacity to represent global interests and facilitate collective action.<sup>47</sup>

## **PEACE AND SECURITY**

Peace and Security refers to the condition of individuals, communities, and nations where they are free from threats and violence. All actors in the international system, not just governments, share responsibility for establishing peace and security, which are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing.<sup>48</sup> The concept of positive peace has gained further traction, as it goes beyond the absence of war to include factors like strong institutions, equitable resource distribution, respect for human rights, and good governance.<sup>49</sup> Security today encompasses the concept of human security, which addresses threats to survival such as poverty, disease, environmental degradation, and human rights.

## **POLITICAL-JUDICIAL JUSTICE**

Political-Judicial justice refers to the complex relationship between politics, power, and judicial systems, and how legal systems can be used to both uphold and challenge political authority.<sup>50</sup> It also means a fair voice for all parties in international decision-making and processes that adhere to the rules of international law. At the global level, better public dialogue and reasoning are encouraged, including by engaging civil society organizations and the global media in such discussions.<sup>51</sup>

## **SOCIOECONOMIC JUSTICE**

Socioeconomic justice is defined as the fair distribution of economic opportunities and access to essential services and protections that allow people the right to live in dignity and security, regardless of their income, gender, nationality, or race.<sup>52</sup> It serves as a cornerstone for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among nations.<sup>53</sup> Socioeconomic justice requires addressing structural inequalities and ensuring that the benefits of development are shared inclusively across society.

## **TRIPLE PLANETARY CRISIS**

More frequent and intense heat waves, droughts, floods, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, melting glaciers, and species loss are all symptoms of the three intersecting crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. These components of this “triple planetary crisis” are deeply interconnected: as pollution enters the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems deteriorate, exacerbating climate change and undermining nature’s ability to absorb humanity’s collective effluents, creating an unrelenting cycle of environmental degradation.<sup>54</sup>

## II. Global Justice in Action: Challenges & Opportunities

*“For the United Nations, ‘justice’ is an ideal of accountability and fairness in the protection and vindication of rights and the prevention and punishment of wrongs. Justice implies regard for the rights of the accused, for the interests of victims and for the well-being of society at large. It is a concept rooted in all national cultures and traditions and, while its administration usually implies formal judicial mechanisms, traditional dispute resolution mechanisms are equally relevant.”*

—Kofi Annan, Seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations<sup>55</sup>

Injustice at the global level takes many forms: for instance, powerful states defying the rulings and disregarding the advisory opinions of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC); continued, substantial levels of economic and social injustice within and between states; and the displacement of millions annually because of climate change and other environmental catastrophes. Despite normative advances over decades and the skill and dedication of international civil servants, global institutions (led chiefly by Member States) have struggled to effectively address these long-standing issues and live up to the high ideals of the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and other foundational documents of the global multilateral system.

In addition to these and related challenges to global justice, this section of the *Future of International Cooperation Report 2025* explores innovations in global governance to meet current and future transnational challenges, risks, and opportunities. Drawing upon four mutually reinforcing principles for operationalizing justice in global governance and four cross-cutting imperatives that help translate them into action, the section introduces six sets of policy and institutional reforms across the political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions of justice. It further relates these ideas to the upcoming World Social Summit, Climate COP30 gathering, and G20 Summit all taking place this November, as well as follow-through to the recent Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and Summit of the Future.

### Major Challenges, Risks, and Opportunities

Global governance is embroiled in a slow-moving crisis. Although progress continues to be made on a variety of international problems, the rate of progress and the structure of international institutions remain inadequate to the scale of the challenges facing humanity in the 21st Century.<sup>56</sup> International institutions are not fully representative of the world’s population, with individuals, countries, and regions granted or denied a voice in international affairs based more on power relations than on inclusive justice.<sup>57</sup> The world

economy remains highly unequal, with a wide gap between the global haves and have-nots (including legal and governance gaps pertaining to new and emerging technologies).<sup>58</sup> Finally, as human activity continues to warm the planet and degrade the environment, efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants remain far too slow and inadequate.<sup>59</sup> If humanity is to rise to these and related challenges, new thinking and reformed institutions are necessary to solve common global problems.

## **POLITICAL-JUDICIAL INJUSTICE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

The international system currently lacks political-judicial justice, that is, a fair voice for all parties in international decision-making and processes that adhere to the rules of international law. Major international institutions give weight to the wishes of powerful states, while leaving other voices unheard. For instance, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) uniquely privileges the five permanent member states (P5), namely China, France, Russia, the UK, and the U.S., with veto authority.<sup>60</sup> Even with the General Assembly's recent steps to deliberate upon each individual use of a veto, the continued abuse of the power to veto has made the UNSC largely ineffective in deterring or ending many international and civil conflicts.

Since 2020 alone, the veto power has been used 21 times to prevent action on a variety of security crises.<sup>61</sup> The Security Council is also unrepresentative of the world's population, with Africa and Asia having only six of 15 seats despite having 77% of the world's people.<sup>62</sup> The problem is widely recognized, with multiple new Security Council reform proposals tabled since 2023 alone.<sup>63</sup> Without urgent structural reform in its representation and decision-making, the UNSC risks a further slide into ineffectiveness and illegitimacy.

Significant structural problems also plague the international judicial system. International courts, especially the International Court of Justice (also known as the World Court) and the International Criminal Court, suffer from low levels of participation among influential states and a lack of ability to enforce their rulings.<sup>64</sup> Powerful states often defy court rulings that they do not like, with only 38% of UN Member States accepting the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ (including only one of the P5 countries: the UK).<sup>65</sup> If the rule of law internationally is to mean anything, the international judicial system must be strengthened to allow it to enforce agreed global norms and guide behavior based on these established norms.

## **SOCIOECONOMIC INJUSTICE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

Economic inequality around the world has been decreasing but remains shockingly high.<sup>66</sup> Economic prospects and material comfort are still largely dependent on where one is born. Where levels of economic inequality are high, people's ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder decreases, slowing progress toward broad-based growth and poverty eradication.<sup>67</sup> Persistent inequality underscores the urgent need for robust development financing to level the playing field and give all citizens similar opportunities to enhance their personal capabilities and to expand their individual choices — the essence of human development.

Despite this identified enormous gap, the world faces huge shortfalls of development financing, recently worsened by funding pullbacks (coupled with increased military expenditure) by wealthy countries, especially the United States.<sup>68</sup> Estimates of the total resources required to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) run as high as \$4 trillion per year.<sup>69</sup> Major global financial institutions,

such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), cannot fully support all of the world's development finance needs, and neither can multilateral development banks operating regionally.<sup>70</sup> With current levels of aid and development funding insufficient to achieve the international community's ambitious goals, financial reform — across international institutions, governments, and the private sector — to make more resources available will be critical.

In addition to boosting the availability of resources to developing countries, international cooperation can help to remove the obstacles draining the resources required to achieve shared global goals. First is the crisis of burgeoning debt worldwide; in 2024, low and middle-income countries spent more than \$1.4 trillion on debt servicing alone.<sup>71</sup> The recent Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4)'s Sevilla Commitment and the Paris Club's Common Framework stress the importance of debt reform, as debt servicing continues to sap tremendous domestic resources necessary for vital public services.<sup>72</sup> Tax evasion and illicit financial flows also hinder the ability for countries to invest in public services through a stable tax base, resulting in an annual loss of hundreds of billions of dollars.<sup>73</sup> In addition to ongoing negotiations on a new UN Tax Convention (see below), the OECD and G20's Automatic Exchange of Information standard is a global instrument to combat offshore tax evasion that benefits all states, including least developed and middle-income countries, in urgent need of tax revenue to deliver on essential socioeconomic development tasks.<sup>74</sup>

## **ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

The 2015 Paris Climate Accord aimed to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels; as of 2024, this limit has already been breached.<sup>75</sup> Consequently, the world faces a monumental environmental crisis, which will severely impact its most economically disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Alarmingly, the UN reported in mid-2024 that some 90 million forcibly displaced people (out of an estimated 123 million globally) face high-to-extreme exposure to climate-related hazards where they presently reside, an increase of five million since late 2023.<sup>76</sup> Human actions are the primary driver of this planetary crisis.<sup>77</sup> Over 70% of historical global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions can be attributed to just 78 corporate and state producing entities, threatening the rights and safety of people in countries who hardly contribute to emissions.<sup>78</sup>

Climate change is not the only environmental crisis facing our planet. Millions of people die prematurely every year due to pollution.<sup>79</sup> On August 15, 2025 (and similar to inconclusive negotiations late last year in Busan), negotiations ended in Geneva without an agreement on a major new treaty to end growing plastic pollution around the world.<sup>80</sup> Biodiversity loss further threatens the natural beauty of our world, as well as access to food and clean water. These consequences are also highly unequally distributed: poor countries that emit few pollutants are often the most exposed to the negative impacts of global warming and environmental degradation, accentuating their highly unequal relationship with richer countries.<sup>81</sup> Taken together, the intertwined issues of pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change have been dubbed an environmental “triple planetary crisis.”<sup>82</sup>

While there are numerous environmental agreements in place to limit humanity's destructive effects on the environment, these efforts are hamstrung by a lack of robust enforcement and financing mechanisms. Global environmental governance is highly fragmented, with no one intergovernmental body or operational international agency in charge of ensuring coherence, aiding enforcement, and avoiding overlap between more than 300 multilateral environmental agreements.<sup>83</sup> At the 29th Conference of



the Parties (COP29) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in November 2024 in Baku, governments committed to a per annum target of \$300 billion by 2035 in support of developing countries' climate action, though climate experts estimate that \$1.3 trillion is actually needed.<sup>84</sup> Without an effective way to synchronize, monitor, and enforce global environmental governance, human activity will continue to degrade the health of the environment and leave future generations living with the consequences of the triple planetary crisis.

The international community has numerous upcoming opportunities to coalesce around meaningful reforms and new initiatives for action, particularly as it pertains to the future of global governance (table 2.1). This November, the World Social Summit in Doha, Climate COP30 in Belém, and the G20 Summit in Johannesburg provide momentous opportunities to build consensus for vital multilateral innovations, in order to fulfill the promises of the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and other foundations of the multilateral system. If the international community fails to come together to revitalize global governance in accordance with international justice, the multilateral system will continue to weaken, with devastating consequences for people worldwide.

**Table 2.1: Recent / Near-Term International Conferences and Initiatives**

	2024	2025	2026	2027
<b>Development and Economic Inequality</b>	Joint Bretton Woods at 80 Initiative	4th International Conference on Financing for Development	WTO Ministerial	Projected UN Tax Convention completion
<b>Environmental Issues</b>	Biological Diversity COP16	Climate COP30	Continuation of Plastics Treaty Negotiations (anticipated)	(Ozone) Vienna Convention and Montreal Protocol Meetings
<b>Reform of International Organizations</b>	UN 2.0 Launch; GA Revitalization deliberations continue	"UN 80 Initiative" reforms on UN streamlining	Ongoing Intergovernmental Negotiations on UNSC	Ongoing HLPF / ECOSOC reform deliberations
<b>International Legal and Human Rights System</b>	ICC Assembly of States Parties; ILC 75th session	ICJ advisory opinion on the climate change obligations of states	Ongoing triannual UN Human Rights Council meetings	ICC Assembly of States Parties; ILC 78th session
<b>Multi-Topic</b>	Summit of the Future	World Social Summit	G20 U.S. Summit	SDG Summit

Source: Original Table, Stimson Center.

## Revisiting Core Principles

Justice has long stood as a foundational ideal in global governance, as enshrined in the opening purposes of the United Nations Charter, which calls for international peace and security in "conformity with the principles of justice and international law," alongside respect for equal rights, self-determination, and human rights for all.<sup>85</sup> However, its guiding principles have not kept pace with a rapidly changing world. As geopolitical, socioeconomic, and environmental pressures intensify, reexamining the principles underlying justice in global governance is not only timely, but necessary.

Introduced in section [one](#), this report’s conception of justice underscores the importance of procedural and retributive justice through formal judicial institutions and processes, the role of informal dispute settlement and justice mechanisms found in most traditional societies (including an emphasis on restorative justice), and how society allocates and manages its resources (distributive justice). Grounded in UN frameworks, reform agendas, and calls from global civil society, this section introduces four core principles for operationalizing justice in action globally: *fairness*, *representation*, *accountability*, and *freedom* (figure 2.1). These principles are reinforced by four cross-cutting imperatives — equitable enforcement, participatory oversight, structural redress, and empowered agency — which could help to bridge the gap between global commitments and lived realities. Additionally, principles outlined in section [three](#) — *accessibility*, *inclusion and collaboration*, *local capacity development*, and *transparency* — though framed regionally, also remain integral to advancing justice at the global level.

**Figure 2.1: Principles of Justice (and Cross-Cutting Imperatives) in Global Governance**



Source: Original Figure, Stimson Center.

## FAIRNESS

Fairness demands not only equal recognition under the law but also just outcomes across diverse contexts.<sup>86</sup> As a dimension of fairness, universality affirms that all individuals deserve equal rights and dignity, regardless of geography, identity, or status.<sup>87</sup> Though central to global justice and the UN’s three pillars — sustainable development, peace and security, and human rights — fairness often fails to deliver equal treatment in practice.<sup>88</sup> The notion of “justice as fairness” emphasizes the need to prioritize those most marginalized in the distribution of opportunities and resources.<sup>89</sup>

Across the multilateral system, from migration regimes that restrict rights by nationality to postcolonial economic structures and unconstrained corporate power that sustains inequality, a persistent gap remains between international ideals and their fair application. Selective enforcement of international laws and impunity for influential states or actors further erode trust in multilateral institutions. It requires both formal equality, equal recognition under the law, and structural redress for historical injustices.<sup>90</sup> If the UN is to fulfill its founding aims, justice must be rooted in fairness not just as a value, but as a structural and practical imperative.<sup>91</sup>

Such a goal entails confronting global systems that institutionalize double standards and exclude equal justice, and recognizing that global poverty and inequality are structural outcomes of, in part, unjust international structures that disproportionately benefit affluent nations and elite groups. These actors bear a heightened responsibility to reshape the global order toward equity.<sup>92</sup> Ensuring fairness, ultimately, requires redefining how justice is delivered — making it enforceable and accessible to all, irrespective of geography, power, or privilege.

## REPRESENTATION

Representation demands inclusive, participatory decision-making across all levels of governance. The legitimacy of global justice rests on the meaningful inclusion of historically marginalized groups, grounded in self-determination and a pluralistic vision of global governance.<sup>93</sup> As international systems grow increasingly multipolar, shifting power dynamics offer new opportunities to expand representation and challenge hegemonic practices. Representation is not achieved through a symbolic or token presence alone within decision-making fora. It requires that individuals and states have the substantive capacity to influence agendas, policies, and implementation of international agreements. Effective representation, therefore, means, in large part, redistributing power to challenge entrenched hierarchies and expand access to decision-making spaces.<sup>94</sup>

Within the UN system, the General Assembly offers a model of inclusive representation through the principle of “one country, one vote,” reflecting the sovereign equality of states and the plurality of global interests. However, its resolutions are non-binding, limiting their authority compared to the Security Council, whose binding decisions under international law highlight deep asymmetries in global power. The Council’s structural limitations and representational imbalances underscore how historical power dynamics continue to constrain inclusive global governance.<sup>95</sup> The Pact for the Future, specifically Actions 39-41, calls for reforms to the Security Council’s composition and veto practices to improve representativeness, accountability, and equity.<sup>96</sup> Such structural reform, promoting inclusive representation in global governance, is essential not only to address political dysfunction. It is further necessary to enhance the legitimacy and fairness of global decision-making, ensuring that today’s multilateral institutions reflect and fully serve the diversity of peoples they claim to serve.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability ensures that international institutions and other powerful actors are held responsible for their actions. It requires transparent law enforcement and adjudication mechanisms to investigate wrongdoing, prevent impunity, and uphold legitimacy in global governance. Lack of meaningful

accountability has perpetuated power imbalances within the multilateral system, which undermines the very justice it purports to promote and safeguard.

Globally, accountability operates through legal, political, and moral frameworks, including international courts and tribunals, UN oversight procedures, and mechanisms for truth-telling, reconciliation, and reparations. For instance, the ICJ and ICC, though distinct in structure and mandate, both rely on state compliance with rulings and arrest warrants.<sup>97</sup> Their effectiveness depends on states upholding their international legal decisions.<sup>98</sup>

The Security Council, the UN's most powerful organ, holds the authority to enact binding international law. A recent effort to enhance transparency and oversight is the "Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council," also known as the *Liechtenstein Veto Initiative* and formally adopted as General Assembly Resolution A/RES/76/262.<sup>99</sup> This resolution established a standing mandate that any use of the veto by a permanent member triggers a General Assembly debate and vote.<sup>100</sup> While this measure introduces a new level of political accountability and public scrutiny, it remains nonbinding — limiting its ability to meaningfully restrain the P5 states.

Erosion of public trust in global institutions stems from the inconsistent application of the UN Charter and international law, particularly when powerful states evade accountability while others are subjected to scrutiny.<sup>101</sup> Restoring trust and accountability in the multilateral system requires the equal, principled, and consistent implementation of international legal obligations.<sup>102</sup> Without such consistency, global governance risks appearing selective and politicized, undermining its legitimacy and the promise of justice.

## **FREEDOM**

Freedom is a forward-looking and restorative principle that demands not only fair processes but also the transformation of systems that perpetuate harm. It centers dignity — the right to live free from domination, exploitation, and marginalization.<sup>103</sup> Rooted in human rights traditions (including civil rights), as well as feminist, decolonial, anti-war, and climate movements, freedom calls for dismantling the structural foundations of inequality, coercion, and violence — not merely addressing their symptoms.

At its core, freedom means liberation from political domination, economic exploitation, and environmental harm. As Amartya Sen argues, freedom is both the means and the end of development: essential for enabling agency and social change, and inherently valuable on its own.<sup>104</sup> Realizing this vision requires expanding people's capabilities to shape their futures, rethinking global governance, and correcting global power imbalances.<sup>105</sup> It also means expanding access to both political power (through free, inclusive governance systems) and economic power (through fair, sustainable markets).

Freedom is especially vital to struggles for Indigenous sovereignty, gender equity, labor rights, and environmental justice — including the rights of future generations, who will inherit the outcomes of today's decisions. As affirmed in the Declaration on Future Generations (adopted at last year's Summit of the Future), states must ensure that present actions uphold the dignity and needs of those to come.<sup>106</sup> Freedom, in this sense, requires accountability for past harms and the ongoing reproduction of inequality, demanding intergenerational and structural approaches to justice.<sup>107</sup> Transformative justice demands more than symbolic recognition. It calls for institutional restructuring and alternatives to

carceral, patriarchal, and extractive systems. Freedom expands the scope of justice from managing harm to preventing it altogether, offering a positive vision that is not only responsive but truly emancipatory.

Together, the four cross-cutting imperatives — equitable enforcement, participatory oversight, structural redress, and empowered agency — form the connective tissue of justice in global governance. They help to operationalize the four principles by translating them into concrete action. By grounding justice in retributive, restorative, and distributive practices, as well as pro-active leadership and initiative in holding influential actors accountable, these imperatives shift global governance from passive systems of management to active frameworks of repair, inclusion, and long-term transformation.

## Global Governance Responses for Reducing Injustice

Improvements in global governance for fighting injustice in its many manifestations worldwide typically take the form of institutional, legal, policy, normative, and operational changes in the international system. Drawing upon the four principles and four cross-cutting imperatives above, and given the current challenges, risks, and opportunities facing global governance, six global governance innovations are introduced below. Each set of recommendations — two each for the political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions of justice — focuses on reforms aimed at developing new or enhanced intergovernmental bodies, instruments, and capacities for improving conditions for the promotion and safeguarding of global justice.

### REFORMING POLITICAL-JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Current international institutions face significant deficits in political and judicial justice, punctuated by a pronounced turning away from international law (including international humanitarian law). Influence is often determined more by power and wealth than by principles of justice, granting wealthy and influential states disproportionate sway while sidelining the voices of marginalized nations and communities. While some disparity is inevitable given differences in population size, economic output, and military capability, much is also the direct result of the structure of international institutions. Major powers and their allies often avoid accountability, enjoying privileged positions within key international bodies that allow them to resist enforcement of international law and block reforms. Although political-judicial justice deficits exist to some degree in almost every international institution, this report focuses on three of the most important: the United Nations Security Council, the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court.

#### Increase UN Security Council Membership to be more Representative

The UNSC, charged with maintaining international peace and security, is often criticized as outdated and paralyzed. Its structure reflects the international power relations of 1945: five permanent, veto-wielding members dominate, and ten non-permanent members (elected for two-year terms) have relatively limited influence. The Council often fails to act in the face of atrocities or aggression involving P5 interests, such as Ukraine, Gaza, and Syria. At the same time, large regions and key contributors to international peace and security are under-represented: Africa, Latin America, and the rest of the Global South want a



greater voice in decisions that often affect them directly. As a result, the UNSC's credibility, effectiveness, and legitimacy have declined to their lowest point in decades, especially as Great Power tensions have resurged.<sup>108</sup> This has, in effect, driven actual high-stakes peacemaking negotiations elsewhere, with the Council approached chiefly to confer *ex post facto* political endorsement.

The need for Security Council reform has been recognized for some time (see [table 2.2](#)), but reform has been stalled for years by political disagreements. The G4 countries — Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan — advocate for permanent seats with veto power to reflect their economic and geopolitical weight. The African Union's Ezulwini Consensus calls for at least two permanent seats for Africa with full veto rights and five non-permanent seats, aiming to rectify historical underrepresentation. In contrast, the Uniting for Consensus group, led by countries such as Italy, South Korea, and Pakistan, opposes new permanent members and instead supports the creation of longer-term, renewable but non-permanent seats to ensure broader regional rotation and equity.<sup>109</sup>

In order to improve representativeness and legitimacy, the UNSC needs expanded membership from the Global South, and fortunately, the Pact for the Future's Actions 39-41 lay out a new path forward for Security Council reform.<sup>110</sup> This could take many forms but should reflect a "consolidated model," as underscored in Pact for the Future Action 40, and it should incorporate elements of the different Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) on Security Council reform proposals. Key characteristics could include, for instance:

- Expand the UNSC from the current 15 to around 21 or 22 members (and no more than 25 members), in line with present-day realities (thereby making the Council more representative and legitimate) and including both new permanent and non-permanent members. This, and the subsequent proposed change below, would require amendments to Article 23 of the UN Charter.
- As a further step toward improving the Council's representative legitimacy (or possibly in lieu of new permanent members, if still not politically viable at this time), non-permanent members should be able to be re-elected to consecutive terms, with the length of terms to be determined. Allowing for immediate re-election would bring more regional expertise to UNSC decision-making and create incentives for elected Member States to act fairly and take responsibility in the Council.
- Since the extension of the veto to new permanent members would likely prove a stumbling block to wider Council reforms, no veto authority for new permanent members is advised.
- Institute a formal consultative mechanism for periodic dialogues between Council members and civil society — building on the successful Arria-formula dialogues conducted since 1992, whereby representatives of civil society, the private sector, and municipalities may be invited by any Security Council member for an informal (consultative) meeting of the Council.

In addition to ideas introduced by the Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance, co-chaired by Madeleine Albright and Ibrahim Gambari, these proposals incorporate key demands from the G4, African Union, and the Uniting for Consensus group, but maintain the existing veto structure of the five permanent members.<sup>111</sup> These reforms could be introduced through UN General Assembly-led negotiations with a focus on achieving two-thirds Member States support and subsequent ratification by national governments (including the UNSC's five permanent members) as required under Article 108

of the UN Charter.<sup>112</sup> This proposed model would enhance representative legitimacy, strengthen Global South representation, and help to avoid the political impasse associated with altering P5 privileges.

**Table 2.2: Major IGN Participants’ Proposals on UNSC Reform**

Proposing Group	Suggested Reforms	Year
<b>G4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Add six new permanent members (G4 countries and two from Africa)</li> <li>▶ Add four or five new non-permanent seats</li> <li>▶ New permanent members would not have veto authority (until a decision is made during a review period)</li> </ul>	2005
<b>African Union</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Add two permanent seats for Africa with veto authority</li> <li>▶ Add two-to-five non-permanent African seats</li> </ul>	2005
<b>Uniting for Consensus Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Add ten new non-permanent seats</li> <li>▶ Introduce a new category of longer-term non-permanent seats</li> </ul>	2005
<b>L69 Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Expand the number of permanent and non-permanent UNSC seats; new seats must fairly represent the Global South</li> </ul>	2007
<b>S-5 Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Limit the use of the P5 veto</li> <li>▶ Improve UNSC transparency</li> </ul>	2012
<b>ACT Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Restrain the use of the P5 veto in cases of atrocities</li> </ul>	2015
<b>Liechtenstein Veto Initiative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ The use of the P5 veto triggers a debate within the General Assembly within ten working days</li> <li>▶ Adopted and in force (<i>technically outside of the IGN process</i>)</li> </ul>	2022
<b>Liechtenstein “Intermediate Model”</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Add six additional seats to the UNSC with eight-or-ten year renewable terms for the holders; the new seats would be distributed among the UN regional groups</li> <li>▶ Update representation requirements for non-permanent seats</li> <li>▶ Update UNSC working methods to be more efficient</li> </ul>	2024
<b>CARICOM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Expand the Council to a size in the “mid-to-upper twenties”; new members would include permanent and non-permanent members with increased regional representation</li> <li>▶ Abolish the veto; if not abolished, new permanent members of the UNSC would also have the veto</li> </ul>	2024

*Note: this list is not exhaustive, and other proposals from countries or blocs exist. Several of the above groups made draft proposals (before formal presentation to the UN) that predate the dates given above. Source: Original Table, Stimson Center. Data sources: UNGA, “General Assembly Opens Debate On ‘Group Of Four-Sponsored Draft Resolution On Security Council Reform’”; African Union, “Consultation between the African Union and the African Civil Society Organizations on the Common African Position on the UN Security Council Reform”; UNGA, “Uniting For Consensus’ Group Of States Introduces Text On Security Council Reform To General Assembly”; UNGA61, *Security Council Reform Process*; UNGA66, *Enhancing the Accountability, Transparency and Effectiveness of the Security Council*; UNGA66, *Letter dated 14 December 2015 from the Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General*; UNGA, “General Assembly Adopts Landmark Resolution Aimed at Holding Five Permanent Security Council Members Accountable for Use of Veto”; Wenaweser, “Revised model for Security Council enlargement – ‘Intermediate model’”; CARICOM, “Model of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) on the Question of Equitable Representation on and Reform of the United Nations Security Council.”*

### **Expand the ICJ and ICC’s Reach through Political Support, Compromissory Clauses, and Advisory Opinions**

The international legal order is upheld by a variety of international courts and other dispute settlement systems, operating globally and regionally and covering various topics and geographic areas. The most recognized are the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

Established by the Statute of the International Court of Justice and the UN Charter, the ICJ is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations.<sup>113</sup> The primary purpose of the ICJ is to decide legal disputes between states and to produce advisory opinions on international law. The United Nations Security Council is supposed to impose penalties for non-compliance with ICJ orders, but to date the UNSC has never done so.<sup>114</sup> Lacking an effective enforcement arm, and with compliance often being a matter of goodwill, allows for the defiance of ICJ rulings.

It is not straightforward to precisely evaluate rates of compliance with ICJ rulings since states often comply with some parts of a ruling but not others, claim compliance while skirting the ruling, or comply after considerable delay and negotiation — though one analysis, in 2005, found that states only fully complied with ICJ rulings 62% of the time, dropping to 40% for cases involving compulsory jurisdiction.<sup>115</sup> With a limited ability to hear cases and no real ability to enforce judgements, the ICJ faces a severe legitimacy deficit, undermining its ability to promote the global justice core principles of fairness and accountability.

The ICJ's jurisdiction remains relatively patchy. While all UN Member States are automatically parties to the Court's Statute, the World Court (which the ICJ is also known as) cannot hear a case unless the states involved consent, either by agreeing to submit a particular dispute to it, or consenting themselves to the ICJ's jurisdiction through a treaty. An exception exists for states that have filed declarations accepting the Court's jurisdiction (through its "optional clause") as compulsory, but to date only 74 states have done so (out of 193 UN Member States).<sup>116</sup> As a result, the ICJ often struggles to address disputes when a state is unwilling to submit to its jurisdiction, making it difficult to hold governments accountable under international law.

The International Criminal Court faces many of the same problems as the ICJ, but to an even greater degree. The ICC was established by the 1998 Rome Statute, and it is tasked with prosecuting *individuals* on genocide, war crimes, the crime of aggression, and crimes against humanity, when Member States are unwilling or unable to do so.<sup>117</sup> Currently, 125 states are party to the Rome Statute, but this notably does not include some of the world's most powerful states: Russia, China, and the United States.<sup>118</sup> The ICC has been accused of bias and ineffectiveness for focusing on situations in weaker states.<sup>119</sup> To date, the International Criminal Court has only convicted seven individuals for Rome Statute violations, all from Africa.<sup>120</sup> More so than the International Court of Justice, the ICC has been subject to intense hostility, partly due to its prosecution of high-profile individuals.<sup>121</sup>

Proper enforcement of both courts' rulings depends, in part, on reforms to other parts of the international system, especially the Security Council (see above). Expansion of both the ICJ's and ICC's jurisdiction is also critical to their efficacy. In the meantime, their present level of effectiveness stems from both courts' power to authoritatively determine violations of internationals. However, without fuller jurisdiction, they often lack the ability to adjudicate high-profile issues. Despite these fundamental challenges, both courts remain busier than ever: the World Court has sought to halt several of today's most high-profile wars (including between Russia and Ukraine, as well as Israel and Hamas), and the International Criminal Court is investigating a dozen conflicts and has issued arrest warrants for some 30 still-at-large defendants.<sup>122</sup> In many of these cases, states willingly agree to uphold the courts' rulings.

At the same time, the reality is that both courts enjoy fewer mechanisms for enforcement than domestic courts and are running up against a growing number of powerful leaders who think "might makes right" and distrust international institutions.<sup>123</sup> Alongside broader efforts to generate greater political support for the International Court of Justice's compulsory jurisdiction (and the ICC's authorities too mandated

through the Rome Statute), an appealing additional solution is to habitually make the World Court the arbiter of what constitutes a violation of particular international agreements.<sup>124</sup> Even though such a renewed step could represent progress, it still does not ensure compliance with ICJ rulings, including by powerful countries that may choose to ignore the World Court's decision, or refuse to sign up (or withdraw from) an international agreement containing such so-called “compromissory clauses.”

The General Assembly should also make greater use of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinions. Moreover, the UN Secretary-General should be granted the authority to request such opinions, which is currently not the case. Though serving as non-binding legal advice on questions of international law, the ICJ can proactively clarify and develop international law through the issuance of advisory opinions, framing debates and policies for the long-term. To date, the ICJ has used this power infrequently and only issued 28 fully completed advisory opinions.<sup>125</sup> The historic ICJ advisory opinion, issued on July 23, 2025, on the climate change-related obligations of states (elaborated below) should help to garner momentum for greater use and innovation of this significant competence of the World Court.

## **FILLING THE SOCIOECONOMIC JUSTICE GAP IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

The *Future of International Cooperation Reports 2023 and 2024* stressed the urgent need to close extreme socioeconomic development gaps within countries and between the developing countries of the Global South and the advanced industrialized countries of the Global North.<sup>126</sup> FIC'23 emphasized how post-pandemic divides were deepening because international financial systems have failed to deliver justice for all, thus contributing to persistent inequalities. In turn, FIC'24 highlighted the need to rethink development finance, including the fundamental role played by multilateral development banks and other international cooperation bodies on critical technology transfer and governance questions. In this sub-section of FIC'25, two new areas of socioeconomic justice in global governance are analyzed, namely, steps toward the completion of a United Nations Tax Convention, and fine-tuning the economic, social, and cultural lens of the UN Human Rights Council.

### **Finalize a Strong UN Tax Convention**

One of the core reasons global inequalities — within and across countries — are deeply entrenched relates to dysfunctions and inadequacies in national tax systems globally. Despite efforts since the adoption of the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda (now succeeded by the July 2025 Sevilla Commitment), developing countries continue to struggle in mobilizing sufficient tax revenue, owing in part to cross-border tax abuse, which costs countries about \$492 billion annually, out of which 72% of tax loss occurs due to multinational corporation profit shifting.<sup>127</sup> The present system allows multinational companies and rich individuals to shift their profits offshore and underpay taxes — robbing governments of their share of critical tax revenue.<sup>128</sup> Although high income countries also bear a cost due to cross-border tax abuse, low-income countries tend to suffer disproportionately high impacts.

The growing momentum to finalize a UN Tax Convention signals a rethinking by developing countries and a decisive shift away from their earlier attempts to handle the inequities and weak enforcement of profit-shifting rules, which were perceived as entrenched under the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-dominated status quo favored by industrialized economies. The UN Tax Convention

seeks to reshape global tax governance, resulting from decades of chiefly developing country-led efforts to curtail cross-border tax abuse, such as through base erosion, profit shifting, and illicit financial flows. This convention recognizes the urgent need to replace current global tax governance, dominated by the OECD countries, with a system that is both more inclusive and fairer to the developing states that suffer disproportionately from tax abuse.<sup>129</sup> Initial work on the UN Tax Convention began in 2023.<sup>130</sup>

The convention's draft elements, released in 2024, propose comprehensive rules for profit allocation, automatic exchange of tax information, and solid measures in a bid to prevent base erosion and profit shifting.<sup>131</sup> These elements were viewed by many civil society organizations, policy commentators, and UN bodies as promising, and labelled by some as “ambitious.”<sup>132</sup> Formal negotiations commenced in February 2025, and have progressed from organizational (process-oriented) mode into substantive working sessions. Currently, work is organized around the adoption of the framework convention and two early protocols — one on taxation of services and another on dispute prevention and resolution. UN Member States and other key stakeholders submitted inputs before the first substantive negotiation sessions took place, from August 4–15, 2025, in New York.<sup>133</sup> If the convention is adopted on schedule, the final UN Tax Convention and its protocols are expected by September 2027 ([figure 2.2](#)).<sup>134</sup>

The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, held from June 30–July 3, 2025, in Seville, reaffirmed efforts underway to finalize the UN Tax Convention. The Sevilla Commitment, the conference's chief outcome, calls for tax cooperation that is “fully inclusive and effective, and beneficial to all,” by committing to ensure that multinational corporations are taxed where real economic activity takes place, while also exploring a public country-by-country reporting database and a global beneficial-ownership registry for increased transparency and accountability.<sup>135</sup>

To finalize a strong UN Tax Convention and prevent its oversight from being rendered toothless, binding provisions, including a binding dispute settlement mechanism, are essential. Rather than falling back in negotiations on the all-too-common “Global South versus Global North” narrative, the convention should be framed as a collective opportunity to redefine fiscal sovereignty, reduce polarization, and increase partnerships for all countries. Simultaneously, anticipated safeguards within the UN Tax Convention, such as transparent public reporting, information-sharing, and independent monitoring, would help to ensure greater accountability and translate commitments into concrete outcomes. To achieve a successful long-term outcome, it is also essential that all future signatories to the convention implement their commitments effectively through related domestic legislation.

### **Bolster Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights through UN Human Rights Council Innovations**

Part of narrowing the socioeconomic justice gap is also ensuring implementation of universal human rights through deliberation and enforcement mechanisms that hold corporations and states responsible. Civil and political rights have always been widely discussed in the international rights discourse; however, the same weight has not been attached to emphasizing the value of economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCRs), including food, water, social security, employment, housing, education, and health.

**Figure 2.2: The UN Tax Convention Process**

Source: Center for Economic and Social Rights, [“The UN Tax Convention Terms of Reference Have Been Approved: What’s Next?”](#) 2024.



In recent years, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) has focused on upholding ESCRs through its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and through the Special Procedures System, recasting, for instance, both unequal tax issues and underfunded social protection programs as human rights transgressions.<sup>136</sup> Along these lines, regressive tax policies and illicit financial flows are now defined by the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights as structural injustices that fuel poverty and block the attainment of ESCRs.<sup>137</sup> Special Procedures and Rapporteurs are making a difference on multiple fronts, including on food as a weapon of war and on economic policy issues, such as debt and taxation.

The Human Rights Council's ability to advance ESCRs, including those committed to by states in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ratified in 1976), faces persistent challenges.<sup>138</sup> UPR recommendations on progressive taxation and social protection signal a broad consensus, but they remain non-binding; their implementation, therefore, hinges on the political will of national governments.<sup>139</sup> This is not unique to the HRC; it reflects a wider dilemma in international law and global governance, where enforcement depends on states integrating commitments into domestic legislation.<sup>140</sup> Ensuring accountability, therefore, requires creative approaches — linking human rights to other legal frameworks, such as international tax treaties, TRIPS flexibilities, and multilateral cooperation initiatives.<sup>141</sup>

Structural obstacles also limit the Human Rights Council's effectiveness. Politicization is entrenched, with major powers across regions often obstructing consensus on socioeconomic rights.<sup>142</sup> At the same time, weak national human rights institutions mean that Universal Periodic Review outcomes often receive little follow-up domestically, blunting their impact.<sup>143</sup>

Several innovations could help the Council address these barriers to progress. A UPR “compliance scorecard” could increase transparency and generate peer pressure on implementation.<sup>144</sup> Procedural decisions of the HRC could also be subject to qualified majority voting to overcome consensus-blocking tactics.<sup>145</sup> Additionally, the Council should encourage ESCRs adoption in myriad international agreements, including by endorsing the UN Tax Convention now under negotiation (see above), drawing explicit connections between fiscal governance and human rights.<sup>146</sup> The Human Rights Council can further help Member States effectively incorporate ESCRs into national laws based on concrete UPR recommendations and by encouraging UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights technical assistance.<sup>147</sup> Finally, closer HRC engagement with strengthened regional (underscored in section [three](#) of this report) and national human rights bodies — supported by adequate resourcing — would help to ensure that international commitments lead to greater regional and domestic action.<sup>148</sup>

The Human Rights Council's growing attention toward socioeconomic rights is an important development. To be more effective, it should introduce stronger monitoring tools, reduce politicization, and enhance cooperation with parallel governance regimes operating regionally and nationally. These steps would allow the Council to play a more vital and decisive role in advancing global socioeconomic justice.

## **ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

The global environmental crisis is a fundamental justice and human rights issue. The right to life, housing, health, food, water, education, and meaningful and informed participation, along with many other rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are jeopardized by transgression of the Earth's planetary boundaries (of which seven of nine have already been breached, including the recent crossing

of the ocean acidification boundary, threatening human livelihoods and the ecosystem as a whole).<sup>149</sup> In 2024, average global temperatures exceeded 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels for the first time.<sup>150</sup> The ICJ's 2025 advisory opinion on states' climate obligations further underscored that environmental degradation constitutes a grave human rights concern and clarified states' legal responsibilities, opening the door to accountability for those chiefly responsible for the crisis.<sup>151</sup>

The warming of the planet associated with climate change increases inequality and disproportionately impacts youth, Indigenous peoples, and developing countries.<sup>152</sup> This November's Climate COP30 in Belém and Second World Summit on Social Development in Doha should aim to address these human development and human rights implications of the climate crisis and to establish accountability mechanisms vis-à-vis those chiefly responsible. Both outcomes would enhance efforts to facilitate a transition away from a carbon-emitting, fossil fuel-based economy to a more just, green, and sustainable future.

### **Establish A United Nations Climate Change Council**

Major international instruments, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (1994) and the Paris Climate Agreement (2015), anchor multilateral efforts to progress on climate action, but they lack an effective coordinating body to connect, streamline, and facilitate climate implementation and compliance. The creation of a UN Climate Change Council could help the world take forward long-standing climate commitments.

Proposed by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil during the November 2024 G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the UN Climate Change Council could function within or alongside the UNFCCC and support implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. A standing Secretariat could assist and coordinate decision-making.<sup>153</sup> Additionally, a proposed “Just Transition Review and Response” tool could track progress on climate pledges and recommend corrective actions, potentially encouraging a “race to the top” among major emitters seeking to assert climate leadership internationally. It could further help countries deliver better on their Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, and Global Stocktake.

If organized in a manner similar to the makeup of the geographically diverse, forty-seven Member State UN Human Rights Council, the UN Climate Change Council could ensure high-level representation and meaningful participation on climate issues by the most climate vulnerable states, as well as young people, women, and Indigenous groups most directly impacted by the climate crisis (see [box 2.1](#)). In 2009 at COP15, the UNFCCC Secretariat granted provisional constituency status to youth NGOs, recognizing the importance of youth voices in climate negotiations.<sup>154</sup> In this spirit, Member States on the Climate Change Council should allocate positions in their delegations for youth representatives.

The UN Climate Change Council should also center the role of scientific expertise to combat misinformation. One option is a Global Scientific Advisory Board where scientists, Indigenous peoples, gender and climate specialists, and community-based experts could periodically provide recommendations to the Council and annual Climate COPs.<sup>155</sup> This advisory body could examine links to the other eight planetary boundaries beyond climate by conducting research, authoring opinions, and supporting both the Council and states in assessing their shared responsibility and capacity for responding to the climate crisis.<sup>156</sup>

### **Box 2.1: El Corredor Seco: Climate-Induced Displacement and Indigenous Youth in Central America's Dry Corridor**

The region known as El Corredor Seco, or the “Dry Corridor” (running through El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua), is notorious for extreme weather events, including long periods of drought and storms that lead to widespread food insecurity and high levels of forced migration from rural regions. 90% of Central America’s population resides in this region, with an estimated 2.7 million in need of food assistance. Indigenous peoples often first face the direct consequences of climate change, due to their dependence upon and close relationship with the natural environment and its resources. Rural populations of Indigenous Peoples who rely on farming and other Indigenous practices, and younger members in particular, are often the hardest hit by climate-induced food insecurity. Working-aged people are displaced and forced to seek work opportunities elsewhere, while families with young children often head north to Mexico or the U.S. southern border.

Migration routes from the dry corridor are incredibly dangerous, particularly for Indigenous youth because of border patrols and the risk of human trafficking. When seeking refuge at the U.S. border, many face indefinite detention in inhumane facilities at the end of their journey. Indigenous groups faced with forced migration often experience a loss of cultural knowledge, particularly youth who may have migrated before the knowledge could be passed on by their community. For these and related reasons, displacement is a crucial example of how the climate crisis is a human rights and broader justice issue.

As food security across Central America depends on enabling people to continue farming without fear for their own future, the international community should engage with local communities on how best to sustain their livelihoods through greater climate resiliency, leading to improved food security while sustaining environmental stewardship. It is essential to include communities with such experiences in discussions around the climate crisis. Sourcing knowledge from directly impacted peoples with insightful cultural knowledge will be crucial to the ongoing pursuit of solutions to the climate crisis.

Source: Original Box, Stimson Center. Data sources: World Food Program USA, [“The Dry Corridor in Central America”](#); Padua Soto, [“Indigenous Youth’s Climate Displacement in Central America’s Dry Corridor”](#); UNEP, [“Helping farmers beat the climate crisis in Central America’s Dry Corridor”](#); UNDESA, [“Climate Change.”](#)

Immediately following COP30 this November in Belém, it is anticipated that the Mission of Brazil to the United Nations in New York, alongside a regionally diverse group of UN Member States, will initiate steps toward a founding General Assembly resolution on a Climate Change Council. If rapidly and skillfully negotiated, the Assembly could establish the new body before COP31 in late 2026, though legal clarity is needed on whether a General Assembly resolution alone suffices for a body intended to operate under UNFCCC auspices, or whether a Climate COP decision, or a hybrid mandate, would be required. If resolved, the Council could encourage innovation and lend momentum to follow-through efforts for delivering on recent ambitious Climate COP commitments, including the Baku to Belém Roadmap on mobilizing, by the mid-2030s, upwards of \$1.3 trillion in climate finance annually.

At the same time, related proposals calling for an Earth System Council (as a fourth UN pillar) or a Global Environment Organization (see Stimson’s *Global Governance Innovation Report 2025*) underscore that climate cannot be siloed from biodiversity, pollution, and land systems.<sup>157</sup> If Member States opt for a UN Climate Change Council, its design should anticipate eventual integration into a more comprehensive planetary governance architecture, serving as a transitional body that provides near-term accountability on climate action, while laying the foundation for a broader environmental governance mandate.

### **Strengthen Accountability for the Climate**

Lack of accountability hinders international cooperation on global environmental governance. The Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council offer a notable blueprint on how knowledge and education, provided by independent experts, can be utilized to inform and guide the actions of the international community.<sup>158</sup> Information and analysis provided by independent experts, such as Special Rapporteurs, can function as soft power, spotlighting the human rights and environmental records of individual countries and encouraging improvements.<sup>159</sup> Expanding such mechanisms to cover climate and the planetary crisis, whether through the United Nations’ Human Rights Council, Secretary-General, and/or the proposed Climate Change Council, would help to integrate environmental performance more fully into global accountability systems.

While the HRC benefits from the advice of two Special Rapporteurs with mandates on human rights and the environment (Astrid Puentes Riaño) and human rights and climate change (Elisa Morgera), respectively, creating a broader system of Special Procedures for the environment and planetary crisis could expand upon the work of these existing rapporteurs. Special Procedures mechanisms on the environment could give Human Rights Council working groups, Special Rapporteurs, and other independent experts an authoritative mandate to monitor Member States’ environmental policies and ensure their alignment with international obligations, while providing constructive recommendations and a viable path forward for states in need of remedial action.<sup>160</sup>

Judicial rulings now provide a stronger backbone for accountability. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea affirmed, in May 2024, states’ legal duty to cut emissions harming the marine environment. More significantly, the International Court of Justice’s landmark July 2025 advisory opinion clarified that inadequate climate action can breach international law.<sup>161</sup> The Court underscored three key duties: i) states must pursue their “highest possible ambition” for environmental commitments; ii) states must regulate private actors under their jurisdiction, and iii) states must recognize that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is inherent to all other human rights.<sup>162</sup> By establishing that climate inaction violates international obligations, the ICJ opinion opens the door to greater legal and political accountability.

Another option for increasing accountability in international environmental governance involves defining ecocide as an international crime. Originally proposed in 2024 by Vanuatu, Fiji, and Samoa as an addition to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, this proposal defines ecocide as “unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe, widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts.”<sup>163</sup> Defining ecocide as an international crime could create a new legal framework for prosecuting those that contribute the most to the present planetary crisis.

Creation of an International Court for the Environment could provide another vehicle to strengthen environmental governance and accountability worldwide. The Climate Governance Commission, which has strongly endorsed this proposal, has argued that the International Court of Justice has only a limited capacity to resolve the planetary crisis.<sup>164</sup> A dedicated International Court for the Environment, with a strong mandate to serve as the central forum for the resolution of international climate and environmental disputes and to issue authoritative advisory opinions, could break new ground in pioneering effective environmental governance.<sup>165</sup> To safeguard its authority, Member States would need to accept the compulsory jurisdiction of such a court, ensure widespread dissemination of judicial decisions, and establish a capable expert staff and an active appellate body.<sup>166</sup> Mounting human and financial costs from climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution are already intensifying demand for stronger accountability mechanisms at the global-level, making reform increasingly unavoidable.

## Bottlenecks and Spoilers

Defiance to the rulings and disregard for the advisory opinions of both the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court, continued extreme forms of socioeconomic inequality within and between states, and the emergence of threats to the natural habitats of humans and other living organisms demonstrate just some of the global justice-related challenges and risks facing global governance institutions. Beyond the fraught geopolitical environment fueled by Great Power tensions and a concern by still too many multinational corporations for profits to the detriment of people and the planet, other chief current and anticipated obstacles to global institutional reform efforts to promote and safeguard global justice are:

- i) rising inflationary and other economic pressures for both states and corporations that seek to respond directly, in partnership with international organizations, to growing divisions and disparities within and between countries;
- ii) ensuring adequate and sustained financing for international organizations, and lately to simply “keep-the-lights-on” let alone conduct investigations, trainings, and other kinds of programming priorities;
- iii) fears of global institutional over-reach into sensitive subjects deemed, at least by some countries, as an infringement of fundamental sovereign rights; and
- iv) hiring and maintaining qualified staff, especially as the wage differential continues to grow between many legal specialists in the international public and private spheres.

Efforts to fully apply the principles and cross-cutting imperatives detailed above, let alone roll-out the global governance innovations introduced, will face myriad impediments to progress. Fortunately, when bottlenecks and spoilers resisting change inevitably emerge, international organizations operating globally can find capable partners, wisdom, and support arising from the hard-won experiences of dynamic institutions based at regional and sub-regional levels. The next section underscores several noteworthy examples of justice in action collectively within diverse regions across the globe.

# III. Regional Justice in Action: Challenges & Opportunities

*“Just as an old Chinese saying goes, ‘A distant relative is not as good as a near neighbor.’ While facing public health emergencies, countries in our region need to help each other and strengthen cooperation.”*

—Khaw Boon Wan, Minister of Health, Singapore<sup>167</sup>

Regional organizations face multiple challenges in advancing justice and performing other critical governance roles, including limited resources, institutional capacity, political will, and the widely shared norms of non-intervention and national sovereignty. Mistrust among states and fear of regional hegemons further hinder cooperation. Nevertheless, regional bodies like the African Union (AU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization of American States (OAS) have taken steps to promote and safeguard justice and human rights. Besides its strong historical and cultural roots, the rise of regionalism is partly a response to the perceived shortcomings of global institutions. Meanwhile, regional organizations frequently collaborate with the United Nations and other global institutions, with some holding permanent observer status at these world bodies and actively advancing their agendas through global initiatives.<sup>168</sup> Regional institutions and motivations vary: the European Union (EU) emerged from a desire to prevent war and promote greater economic integration, while Southeast Asian regionalism, as expressed through ASEAN, emphasizes sovereignty, decolonization, and resistance to external domination.<sup>169</sup>

Amid fears and growing evidence of declining global cooperation, regional governance organizations are increasingly well-positioned to foster unity, cooperation, and justice. By advancing shared interests through agreements, development financing, and political accountability — to name just a few major tools for regional action, they offer a pathway to more effective collaboration among nations with a common geography, shared histories, and often similar policy priorities too. This section examines how varied regional governance configurations address “justice in action” across political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions in emerging new and innovative ways.

## Major Challenges, Risks, and Opportunities

Regional macro-trends reveal persistent challenges to justice across political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental spheres. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to ensure equal access to justice for all by 2030, as outlined in SDG target 16.3, yet the world is off track. According to a 2019 World Justice Project report, 1.5 billion people cannot access justice for civil, administrative, or criminal issues, 4.5 billion are excluded from even basic legal opportunities, and 253 million live in extreme



injustice. Two-thirds of the present, global population, or around 5.1 billion people, face at least one, and often several, of these problems.<sup>170</sup> Socioeconomic inequality is also worsening. Half of low-income countries are in debt distress, and three billion people live in nations that spend more on debt than on health or education.<sup>171</sup> Environmental burdens also fall heavily on the most vulnerable populations. Over 7.3 billion people from a global population of around 8.1 billion today breathe air that's more polluted than what is considered safe, 80% of whom live in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>172</sup>

## **POLITICAL-JUDICIAL INJUSTICE IN REGIONAL GOVERNANCE**

Political-judicial injustices, including corruption, restricted access to justice, and human rights violations, remain major challenges within regions around the world. In Latin America and the Caribbean, most people in 18 countries (out of 23 examined across the region) believe senior officials are undermining the judiciary.<sup>173</sup> In 2023, the World Justice Project reported that, over the previous five years, 81% of Asia-Pacific nations' scores declined on their judiciary's ability to check executive power, 62% declined on judicial freedom from improper influence, and 52% saw diminished impartiality in Asia-Pacific criminal justice systems.<sup>174</sup> In parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), such as Tunisia, the lack of inclusive governance erodes judicial independence.<sup>175</sup>

In Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa stands out for its strong constitutional protections, while other countries in the region struggle with widespread corruption and military interference.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, corruption remains the main barrier to justice in the courts across many African countries.<sup>177</sup> According to the Global State of Democracy Index, only four African countries (Cabo Verde, Gambia, South Africa, and Tunisia) out of 54 in the region rank in the top quartile globally for judicial independence, while 19 fall in the bottom quartile.<sup>178</sup> Meanwhile, Latin America has seen a growing trend of employing national courts for political retribution, as reflected in the World Justice Project's 2024 Rule of Law Index showing declines in 20 of 32 countries across the region.<sup>179</sup> Such politicizing ultimately results in the erosion of public trust in legal systems, the consolidation of power among autocrats and elites, and heightened political instability and civil unrest.

Regional courts play a vital role in advancing justice beyond the national level, but they, too, face significant challenges. Issues of sovereignty, limited resources, and the need to balance regional and national interests frequently hinder their effectiveness. While institutions like the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) have created important avenues for accountability and legal redress, their progress has been uneven.<sup>180</sup> These courts often struggle with restricted jurisdiction, weak enforcement mechanisms, and inconsistent compliance from Member States.

While the ECHR has overcome many political and judicial hurdles, it still confronts significant risks and challenges. As of 2024, a backlog of 70,000 cases strained its ability to balance quality and speed, while some states have delayed or refused to implement its rulings, especially on sensitive matters involving sovereignty or democratic processes.<sup>181</sup> In Asia, which lacks a unified regional court (or even sub-regional courts) with binding authority, several countries have suppressed dissent by politicizing their national courts, often using anti-terrorism or national security laws to silence opposition.<sup>182</sup>

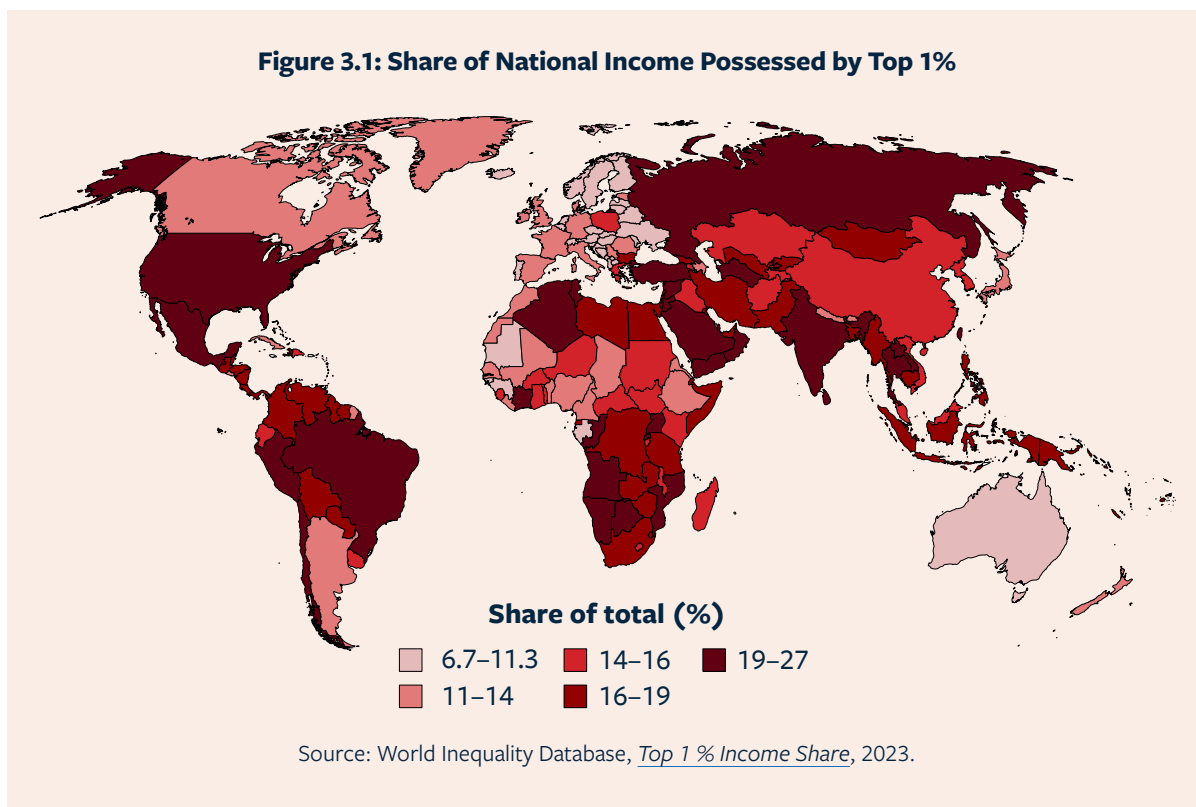
## SOCIOECONOMIC INJUSTICE IN REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

Socioeconomic injustice is pervasive worldwide, reflected in widening wealth and income gaps (see figure 3.1), high unemployment, persistent poverty, and social exclusion. As of 2024, economic burdens remain, in particular, heavily concentrated in the Global South. Nearly 700 million people (8.5% of the world's population) live in extreme poverty; about two-thirds of those people live in sub-Saharan Africa, with significant proportions also found in the Latin America and MENA regions.<sup>183</sup>

Wealth inequality is also severe, with the poorest half of the world's population owning 2% of total wealth, averaging \$4,100 per adult, while the richest 10% hold 76%, averaging \$771,300 per adult.<sup>184</sup> Income inequality varies widely across regions, with Europe exhibiting the highest levels of equality and MENA the greatest disparities. In Europe, the top 10% earn 36% of the region's income, compared to 58% in MENA, 55% in Latin America, and 43% in East Asia.<sup>185</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, the youth unemployment rate stands at 13.4%, while in North Africa it exceeds 26%.<sup>186</sup> In Latin America and the Caribbean, 60% of youth employment is in the informal sector, offering little to no social or labor protections.<sup>187</sup>

The digital divide remains severe too, with 2.6 billion people — mostly in the Global South, and particularly women, youth, and informal workers — lacking internet access and, thus, excluded from both digital economies and certain decision-making processes.<sup>188</sup> Limited access to affordable, long-term financing constrains public investment in digital public infrastructure, just as it does in health and education. The digital divide reflects and deepens structural inequalities, as poor digital public infrastructure often coincides with high wealth inequality and debt, limiting investment in digital access.<sup>189</sup>

**Figure 3.1: Share of National Income Possessed by Top 1%**



The Addis Ababa Action Agenda and now Sevilla Commitment's call for fair taxation, stronger public institutions, and greater domestic resource mobilization to address development challenges.<sup>190</sup> However, rising debt levels driven by climate shocks, high pandemic recovery costs, and higher interest rates are rooted in long-standing global imbalances, where Global South countries have historically faced higher borrowing costs and stricter loan conditions. The African Development Bank (AfDB) has warned of a debt distress trap and called for regional debt workout platforms and concessional financing aligned with climate and development goals.<sup>191</sup> China's growing role as a bilateral creditor adds complexity; its Belt and Road Initiative has financed infrastructure across many countries, but China has also shown limited engagement in coordinated debt relief efforts.<sup>192</sup>

## ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

Environmental burdens fall heavily on the world's poorest regions, owing to reliance on polluting fuels, weak or poorly enforced regulations, proximity to industrial emissions, and the disproportionate impacts of climate change. These difficulties, in turn, contribute to heightened health risks, water scarcity, and land degradation. By 2022, nearly half of the population worldwide faced severe water scarcity annually, with a quarter experiencing extreme water stress withdrawals exceeding 80% of renewable supplies, threatening food security and health (especially in arid regions like MENA and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa).<sup>193</sup>

On average, climate-related hazards cause African countries to lose 2% to 5% of their gross domestic product annually, with many diverting up to 9% of their budgets to respond to climate extremes. The cost of adaptation in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at \$30 to \$50 billion annually.<sup>194</sup> Meanwhile, Southeast Asia has experienced rapid deforestation, losing 1.2% of its forest cover annually from 2001 to 2019,<sup>195</sup> a rate comparable to the Amazon, where plantation expansion and logging similarly drive tropical deforestation and displace Indigenous and rural communities.<sup>196</sup>

The EU's Green Deal aims for climate neutrality by 2050 and a 55% emissions cut by 2030.<sup>197</sup> While on track overall, the EU is failing to meet targets in land use change and forestry.<sup>198</sup> ASEAN's initiatives like the Transboundary Haze Pollution Agreement have seen progress, but overall weak enforcement means air pollution for Southeast Asia still exceeds the World Health Organization's (WHO) guidelines.<sup>199</sup>

Adopted in 2022, the AU's Strategy for Climate Change focuses on resilience through climate-smart infrastructure, drought management, and early warning systems. However, despite extensive regional commitments and ambitious new funding schemes in Africa, the widening gap between policy and reality exposes systemic failures and demands stronger accountability, targeted investment, and inclusive governance. For instance, disaster-related internal displacement in Africa has surged nearly sixfold, from 1.1 million in 2009 to 6.3 million in 2023.<sup>200</sup>

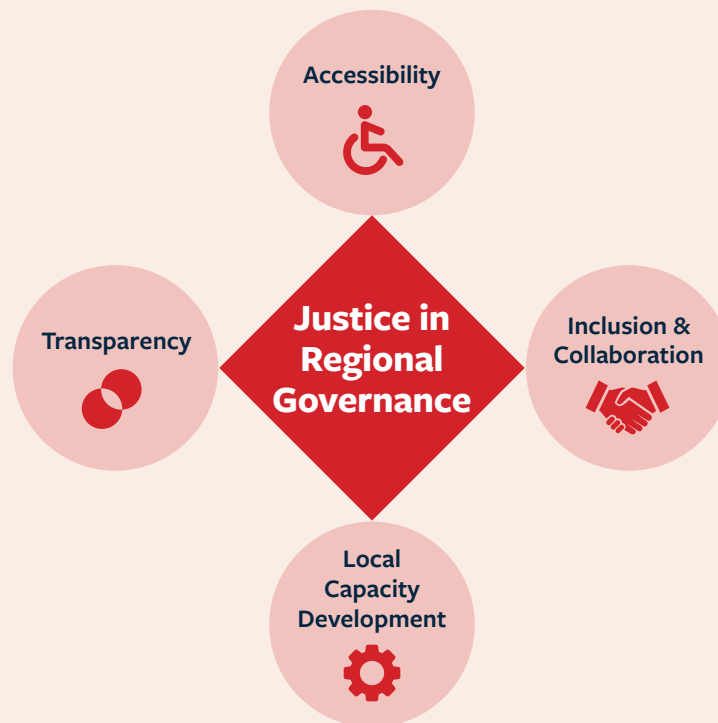
## Revisiting Core Principles

Introduced in section [one](#), this report's conception of justice underscores the significance of procedural and retributive justice through formal judicial institutions and processes, the role of informal dispute settlement and justice mechanisms found in most traditional societies (including an emphasis on restorative justice), and how society allocates and manages its resources (distributive justice). At a time

of injustice and strife worldwide, it is also important to examine existing conceptions and frameworks of justice across diverse regional contexts and along this report’s three dimensions of political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental justice.

Regional institutions — including ASEAN, the OAS, AU, and EU — play a critical role in promoting and safeguarding justice worldwide, though their approaches, scope, and priorities differ. At the same time, four recurring principles animate the methods of regional organizations working to champion justice within their respective geographic spaces: accessibility, inclusion and collaboration, local capacity development, and transparency (figure 3.2). These principles function closely in conjunction with those detailed in chapter two — fairness, representation, accountability, and freedom — aimed at enhancing broader global responses in support of justice. Regional perspectives offer mechanisms tailored to local traditions, knowledge, and needs, complementing and, at times, testing global views of justice.

**Figure 3.2: Principles of Justice in Regional Governance**



Source: Original Figure, Stimson Center.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Pursuing justice requires accessible and equitable avenues — physically, digitally, economically, and linguistically — ensuring all voices a seat at the table where decisions are made. Member States of global institutions can, at times, find official fora physically inaccessible due to, for instance, a host country’s

visa requirements, economic constraints on travel, or international sanctions by the host country. Regional organizations can help overcome physical barriers by convening nearby forums within their respective regions and choosing locations that are accessible to civil society groups and the general public. For instance, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum incorporates equity into accessibility by requiring major meetings to be hosted by a different member country each year.<sup>201</sup> Equity cannot be achieved, however, without economic accessibility and affordability.<sup>202</sup>

Technology is advancing rapidly, and while progress varies across regions, it offers significant potential to enhance digital accessibility, including for people with physical disabilities. Most regional organizations — including Regional Development Banks — maintain websites outlining their initiatives and policies. However, expanding these platforms to include public forums and key services could help to overcome physical barriers to participation and strengthen regional connectivity. Regional organizations can address linguistic inaccessibility too by publishing materials in local languages and dialects — an especially crucial step in multilingual regions where communities often speak languages different from national or official intergovernmental ones, greatly enhancing awareness and information-sharing within a region.<sup>203</sup>

## **INCLUSION AND COLLABORATION**

To advance justice, it is essential to cultivate an inclusive, safe, and non-discriminatory environment that values diverse voices and lived experiences. Organizations should move beyond token representation and actively engage women, youth, Indigenous peoples, those with disabilities, and other marginalized communities in meaningful decision-making.<sup>204</sup> Inclusion requires collaboration among a broad spectrum of actors — including national and local governments, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and public-private partnerships.

Engaging stakeholders across civil society, government, and regions fosters a more comprehensive and effective response to injustice. For example, the EU launched a campaign for climate action, in close collaboration with the Gulf Cooperation Council, uniting regional organizational groupings composed of influential states.<sup>205</sup> Together, they sought to facilitate cooperation through knowledge exchange and partnerships between major stakeholders, as well as by promoting common green policies and technologies at both regional and individual country levels.<sup>206</sup>

Equally important is South-South cooperation that encourages international development collaboration between two or more developing countries (including both states and non-state actors).<sup>207</sup> The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development's Sevilla Commitment reaffirms efforts to enhance South-South and triangular cooperation by strengthening regional financing mechanisms, knowledge exchange, and official development assistance.<sup>208</sup> Regional organizations benefit from inclusive partnerships where local perspectives and identities are respected, knowledge is exchanged, and diverse stakeholders' voices are encouraged.

## **LOCAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT**

Local capacity development seeks to strengthen the capabilities of local actors, organizations, and governments to achieve developmental goals.<sup>209</sup> This includes skills development, improving the

effectiveness of local organizations, facilitating the management of resources, training local leadership, decentralizing decision-making, and supporting grassroots movements. Regional organizations are well-positioned to implement localization, as they often better understand local conceptions of justice, political dynamics, and sociocultural contexts than global organizations do, allowing them to tailor initiatives to local needs. They are also well-suited to promote the efforts of the Grand Bargain,<sup>210</sup> which affirms continued support to localization by providing external funding directly through local actors and supporting greater local capacity development and leadership.<sup>211</sup>

By assessing and working to elevate local capacities, organizations operating regionally can facilitate long-term partnerships and sustainable development outcomes. Strategies that value local expertise, traditions, and the strengthening of local ownership can foster effective and sustainable cooperation between regional organizations and local communities.<sup>212</sup> In 2022, ASEAN released its Localization Toolkit, part of its Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), advocating location-specific action plans and empowering women and vulnerable groups to lead implementation “based on their in-depth understanding of local challenges.” Guidelines for a WPS action plan include conducting a stakeholder impact assessment, building an information-sharing platform, and realigning monitoring and evaluation frameworks with regional principles.<sup>213</sup>

## TRANSPARENCY

Regional organizations should also strive for transparency in their basic functioning and decision-making. Establishing regulatory bodies for communities to report grievances to, publicly sharing performance audits, and engaging civil society and private sector organizations in dialogue fosters transparency and trust with a regional body. These can be expanded into systems that facilitate cooperation between a regional organization, its Member States, and relevant non-state actor partners on both policy implementation and the monitoring and evaluation of shared development goals and policies. In 2003, the African Union established the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which is a voluntary arrangement between African states to independently assess their individual governance efforts with the help of a highly respected independent experts panel. Each assessment brings forth a national program of action to tackle specific identified development challenges. Progress made on the program of action is reviewed every six months or sometimes yearly, the reports of which are submitted to an APRM review body, and the findings and recommendations reached are made available to the general public.<sup>214</sup> Such a novel approach to transparency allows for AU Member States to be held accountable by one another, as well as vis-à-vis the general public.

Together, the four principles of accessibility, inclusion and collaboration, local capacity development, and transparency offer a holistic and meaningful approach toward realizing justice. When put into practice, these principles demonstrate the potential of tackling injustice, in its many forms, through effective regional governance.

## Regional Governance Responses for Reducing Injustice

Regional organizations play a vital role in addressing injustice by bridging global frameworks with local realities. With their close proximity to their Member States and deep understanding of regional contexts,



regional institutions are well-positioned to promote justice in the political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental spheres. Through tailored initiatives, localized mechanisms, and cross-border cooperation, regional governance bodies can confront persistent inequalities that fuel injustice — from political exclusion and economic disparity to environmental degradation — while fostering inclusive and participatory systems that reflect the needs and voices of diverse communities.

Drawing upon the four principles above, six global governance innovations are introduced below. Each set of recommendations — two each for the political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions of justice — focuses on reforms aimed at enhancing intergovernmental bodies, instruments, and capacities for improving conditions to better promote and safeguard justice within distinct regional contexts.

## **REFORMING POLITICAL-JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS IN REGIONAL GOVERNANCE**

A core challenge to reimagining governance within a region lies in overcoming the political and judicial barriers to justice. The politicization of judicial institutions, alongside corruption, weak legal enforcement, the high costs associated with accessing courts, complex procedures, and delays and court backlogs continue to undermine justice worldwide, denying millions of fairness, the rule of law, impartiality, and accountability.

Meanwhile, regional human rights courts play a critical role in advancing political and judicial justice by providing an additional layer of accountability and adjudication tools, especially when domestic institutions are weak, biased, or compromised. The European Court of Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights have each influenced national laws, protected political rights, and upheld judicial integrity across their respective regions. Most regional human rights courts function like a judicial arm to enforce or promote the charter of regional organizations. For instance, the IACtHR interprets and implements the American Convention on Human Rights of the Organization of American States.<sup>215</sup> Beyond courts, regional organizations more broadly strengthen domestic rule of law through capacity development programs and sustained engagement with Member States.<sup>216</sup>

While no court is immune to political pressures, global judicial bodies such as the ICC have often faced accusations of selective justice and politicized prosecutions, particularly from African states and other actors across the Global South.<sup>217</sup> By contrast, regional human rights institutions in Europe, the Americas, and Africa have generally been more effective, less resisted, and more embedded in domestic processes, enabling them to exert pressure and promote accountability with greater legitimacy.<sup>218</sup> Still, regional courts face compliance and ratification challenges: only 34 of the 55 African Union Member States have ratified the protocol establishing the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, and only 8 of those have submitted the additional declaration permitting direct access by individuals and NGOs, limiting its overall effectiveness.<sup>219</sup>

While many regions maintain courts with human rights mandates, a few lack regional judicial bodies, including the Arab region and across Asia and the Pacific. The Arab Court of Human Rights, established by a 2014 statute of the League of Arab States, has yet to be established due to insufficient ratifications and concerns over transparency and civil society consultation.<sup>220</sup> While the Asia-Pacific has regional human rights mechanisms and initiatives, such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, no region or sub-region of the Asia-Pacific maintains a human rights court or other type of sub-regional judicial mechanism.<sup>221</sup>

## Foster a People-Centered Approach to Justice within Regional Human Rights Courts

Regional courts and political intergovernmental organizations must implement a people-centered approach to justice, which emphasizes the importance of integrating communities directly in driving justice.<sup>222</sup> While conventional approaches to justice strengthening focus on building courthouses, training judges, and creating institutions, people-centered justice emphasizes addressing individuals' needs, simplifying processes, and making systems of governance more participatory.<sup>223</sup> Steps to “decentralize justice” to address (and bring justice systems closer to meeting) local needs better — drawing lessons from community-focused courts, alternative dispute resolution like mediation, and legal education — can bridge gaps in the judicial system, empower citizens, and create a more accessible, inclusive, and responsive justice ecosystem at both national and regional levels.

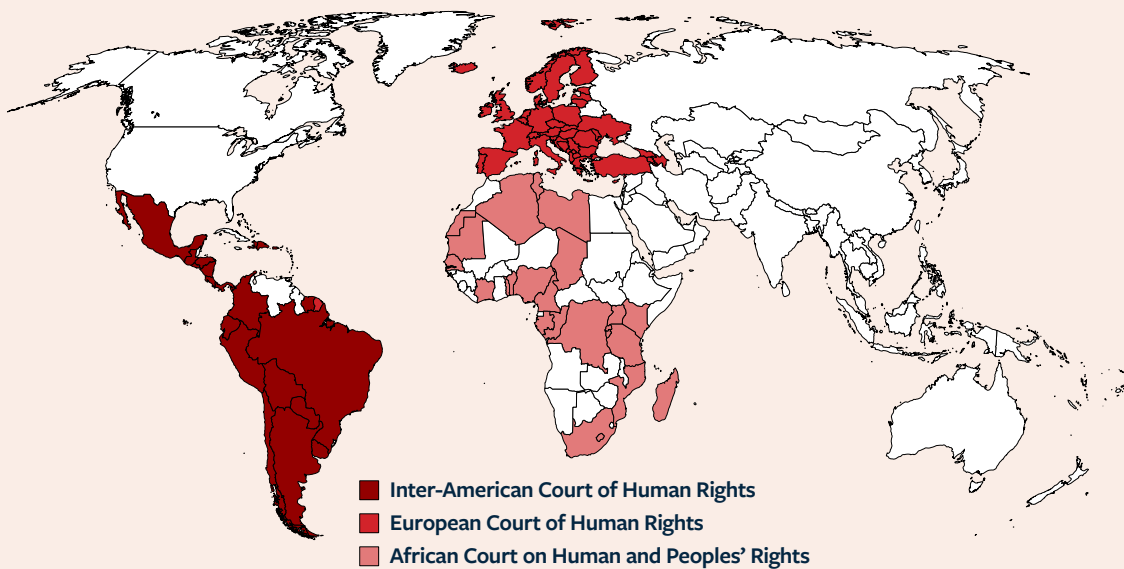
In many parts of the world, conflicts are resolved through informal means, leaving formal legal systems ineffective and lacking public trust.<sup>224</sup> Justice implementation would be strengthened if regional courts incorporated practices such as promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms like community mediation and restorative justice (the latter of which focuses on rehabilitating offenders through reconciliation with victims and the wider community).

Regional human rights courts provide broader legal space to interpret Indigenous rights. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights, for instance, has advanced expansive interpretations of the American Convention on Human Rights (Pact of San José), particularly its provisions on property and judicial protection.<sup>225</sup> The landmark *Saramaka People v. Suriname* (2007) case recognized ancestral property and cultural rights, and required states to secure free, prior, and informed consent for large-scale projects on Indigenous and tribal lands. This jurisprudence remains influential in shaping both national judicial decisions and broader regional practice.<sup>226</sup>

Greater transparency and accessibility to information about the judicial process must be promoted to further empower citizens within both national and regional courts. Providing citizens with clear resources — like guides, tutorials, and outreach programs — and making court decisions and case updates publicly accessible help people understand their rights, the legal process, and stay informed. In rural and underserved areas, limited legal resources hinder access to justice; providing legal aid, community clinics, and free mobile legal advice can help address this. Along these lines, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights established its Legal Aid Scheme in 2012 to provide free legal assistance to unrepresented applicants, upholding the court's protocol that everyone is entitled to legal representation.<sup>227</sup> Similarly, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights operates a Victims' Legal Assistance Fund to support individuals without the resources to bring cases before the court, helping to ensure equal access to justice.<sup>228</sup> The European Court of Human Rights also guarantees legal aid and the right to a fair trial under Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, while Article 47 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights provides parallel guarantees within the EU legal system.<sup>229</sup> Together, these three regional human rights courts cover a substantial portion of the world's countries and total population ([figure 3.3](#)).

Regional courts like the AfCHPR are further undertaking initiatives like colloquia, seminars, and conferences to raise public awareness about the court's functions and how individuals can submit applications.<sup>230</sup> Additionally, the Inter-American human rights system provides annual reports summarizing proceedings through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, while the IACtHR publishes the full text of judgments and makes case records, briefs, and evidence accessible through its online library.<sup>231</sup>

**Figure 3.3: States Recognizing the Jurisdiction of Regional Human Rights Courts**



Source: Original Figure, Stimson Center. Data Sources: European Court of Human Rights, “[Composition of the Court](#)”; African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights, “[Basic Information](#)”; Justice Trends Press, “[The Inter-American Court of Human Rights: Advancing Justice in the Americas.](#)”

Altogether, clearer guidelines, greater access to case information, and support for underserved regions hold the potential to enhance the public’s understanding and engagement with regional human rights bodies. Moreover, they also strengthen their capacity to help reduce regional inequalities and fight regional injustices.

Other reform innovations that would help to strengthen how regional human rights courts promote and safeguard justice and improve their coordination with global judicial bodies (while respecting distinct mandates), as well as with civil society groups, are:

- Regional human rights courts and global judicial bodies joint dialogues, as well as consultations between regional human rights courts and civil society groups. The latter, in particular, would enable the public to submit complaints directly to regional human rights courts, facilitate the exchange of best practices, and enhance civil society’s role in promoting justice and accountability.
- Mutually beneficial linkages between regional human rights courts and the “UN 2.0 Action Plan” (coming out of the September 2024 Summit of the Future). UN 2.0 promotes the use of digital platforms for sharing best practices, strengthens institutional support for global digital governance, and invests in technology and capacity-building, which could be leveraged to help modernize justice systems.<sup>232</sup> Pursuing such connections would enable regional human rights courts to have broader access to information and facilitate stronger communication with global organizations.

- Finally, drawing inspiration from experiences in the Americas, Africa, and Europe, an Arab Court of Human Rights and similar human rights bodies across multiple, diverse sub-regions of Asia and the Pacific should be explored through inclusive, broad-based consultations. This would allow for more global coverage of regional human rights bodies.

### **Prioritize Issue-Specific Judicial Competencies and Training for Regional Human Rights Courts**

Issue-based judicial competencies and training, coupled with up-to-date education for judges on issues such as regional inequality, human rights, and economic or environmental justice, can strengthen the understanding and advancement of justice across distinct regions. This would enable regional human rights courts to manage complex cases more effectively and make them more responsive to society's changing needs. Specialized human rights judicial bodies and officials enable deeper expertise and technical understanding, more consistent rulings, and faster case resolution. This could take the form of regional courts with substantive reach on such diverse issues such as the human rights implications of environmental degradation, cybercrime, labor rights violations, and discrimination within a country's healthcare and educational systems.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights addresses issue-based concerns through its (sometimes) contentious cases, advisory opinions, and the Special Rapporteurs and thematic units established by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Advisory opinions are authoritative interpretations of an issue or human rights concern, designed to guide normative, policy, and legal development. For instance, the IACtHR has issued advisory opinions on the climate emergency's impact on human rights, establishing strengthened climate litigation, clarity on state obligations, and recognition of both vulnerabilities and traditional knowledge.<sup>233</sup>

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has further established thematic rapporteurships to support historically vulnerable groups and to strengthen, promote, and systematize its work. Rapporteurships focus on women, migrants, human rights defenders, and especially Indigenous peoples, among other vulnerable groups.<sup>234</sup> Moreover, by carefully interpreting new human rights instruments, such as the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (ADRIP) in conjunction with the American Convention on Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has exerted significant influence. Even prior to its adoption in 2016, the draft ADRIP introduced the concept of ancestral property and cultural rights, empowering Indigenous peoples and local communities across the region.<sup>235</sup>

While the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights may request the opinions of experts on specific topics, it functions as a unified bench without topic-based chambers.<sup>236</sup> Similarly, the European Court of Human Rights lacks issue-based programs and assigns cases to judges by caseload rather than expertise.<sup>237</sup> Overall, specialized judicial bodies within human rights courts would enhance the nuance, precision, and effectiveness of decisions, strengthening the promotion of justice within a regional context.

### **FILLING THE SOCIOECONOMIC JUSTICE GAP IN REGIONAL GOVERNANCE**

A key challenge for global and regional governance alike is addressing entrenched socioeconomic inequities in developing countries, such as high levels of youth and female unemployment, and poor access to infrastructure and finance. These issues stem from an international financial architecture

shaped by institutions that often overlook regional realities, including the heavy debt burdens faced by many Global South countries forced to divert scarce public resources away from critical social and economic investments. While institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have historically dominated the development finance landscape, Regional Development Banks (RDBs) — including, for example, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank — are increasingly recognized for their responsiveness to local political and economic crises, offering adaptive and sometimes innovative models of development finance.

Beyond the major RDBs, other regional institutions address socioeconomic disparities through targeted development and social policies. The EU's Cohesion Policy, supported by €392 billion for 2021–2027, funds infrastructure, innovation, and social inclusion to reduce disparities among partner regions and EU Member States.<sup>238</sup> The African Union Development Agency focuses on Africa's development through investments in infrastructure and human capital. In 2025, the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) approved a record \$5.2 billion to fund projects in 10 countries, focusing on infrastructure, energy transition, and social development.<sup>239</sup> ASEAN's 2021–2025 Framework Action Plan targets rural development, education, healthcare, disaster resilience, and gender equality through the ASEAN Villages Network. While several ASEAN Member States have made meaningful progress, others continue to face poverty rates exceeding 20%.<sup>240</sup>

### **Promote Pooled Regional Investment Funds through Regional Development Banks**

The World Bank and IMF are often criticized for promoting maladapted policies emphasizing austerity and liberalization, whereas the Regional Development Banks are embedded in their regions and more structurally aligned with the development visions of their constituencies.<sup>241</sup> The recent Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) emphasized strengthening regional financial institutions, inviting them, for instance, to adopt the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index, to better take into account the unique structural constraints facing least developed countries and conflict-affected states.<sup>242</sup> This would, in turn, enable fairer concessional financing and more responsive development cooperation.

The African Development Bank Group's Gender Strategy 2021–25 extends beyond gender mainstreaming rhetoric by incorporating equity goals into hard infrastructure, agriculture, and financial systems. Similarly, the Caribbean Development Bank's Social Resilience and Inclusion Strategy emphasizes climate vulnerability and prioritizes empowerment of women, youth, and Indigenous peoples at the heart of resilience-building.<sup>243</sup> FfD4 further underscored the need for regional and other development actors to support micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, especially women-led enterprises, through strengthened financial infrastructure and credit facilities.<sup>244</sup>

Regional Development Banks also prioritize underfunded but important sectors, such as informal economies, localized agricultural chains, and social services.<sup>245</sup> An emerging innovation gaining traction among RDBs, including through the African Development Fund and the Asian Development Fund, involves the creation of pooled regional investment funds designed by RDBs, civil society, and regional economic communities.<sup>246</sup> Unlike traditional loans or grants, these funds offer equity investment to social enterprises, cooperatives, and communities supporting women-led informal cooperatives, Indigenous peoples, and youth-led green startups. Pooled regional investment funds have

transformed governance through multistakeholder boards and social metrics like gender pay equity, environmental regeneration, and community ownership. In the Sahel, for instance, these innovative funds support women-led water retention projects that, simultaneously, tackle ecological degradation while promoting social cohesion.<sup>247</sup>

Regional social protection systems also play a key role in helping countries manage compounding shocks. The Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility, a regional pooled fund that provides rapid payments after climate disasters, demonstrates how regional safety nets can deliver timely and equitable justice, though not operating as a traditional financial institution.<sup>248</sup> This approach has proven crucial for the Caribbean, where climate vulnerability intersects with a reliance on tourism, fragile economies, and high public debt, often above 70% of GDP due to disaster recovery and external borrowing costs.<sup>249</sup>

High debt burdens constrain investments in social protection and climate adaptation, reinforcing inequality and reliance on international aid, while regional insurance platforms help to counter this by promoting resilience through solidarity and proactive redistribution. Stronger cooperation between these platforms and global, regional, and national development banks — through joint programming, capacity development, and aligned co-financing — can further enhance their impact. In this regard, Regional Development Banks are also poised to help close critical regional climate finance gaps through innovative approaches that encourage fund-pooling ([box 3.1](#)).

To further promote sustainable development financing, especially in some of the most vulnerable countries, RDBs should expand pooled investment funds across other regions worldwide. This aligns with the recent FfD4 calls for enhancing the capacity of national and regional development banks to deliver long-term, low-cost finance, facilitating stronger collaboration between global, regional, and national banks.<sup>250</sup> Drawing insights from local civil society and regional economic community partners, special attention should be afforded by Regional Development Banks to ensuring that pooled funds invested together are gender and environmentally-sensitive, in addition to helping to tackle other long-entrenched inequalities and other divisions within a targeted region or community. In short, pooled regional funds offer a promising, socially grounded model that balances financial and environmental sustainability with inclusive, broad-based socioeconomic development.

### **Build Digital and Economic Sovereignty through Regional Initiatives**

Data can shape who gets counted, how they are represented, and who controls the narrative. Regional Civic Data Trusts are legal frameworks designed to collect and manage data in the public interest, ensuring transparency, equity, and community ownership.<sup>251</sup> In Latin America, Africa, and Asia, where extractive data practices and weak digital sovereignty are common, data trusts can help in exposing overlooked realities, from informal labor patterns, unrecorded land use, and the scale of unpaid caregiving work often done by women.



### Box 3.1: Delivering Climate Justice through Regional Climate Finance

Global climate finance is falling short. In 2021–2022, annual public and private flows together averaged \$1.3 trillion — around 1% of global GDP. Yet developing countries alone need \$2.4 trillion annually through 2030, including \$1 trillion from external sources. Adaptation funding is especially inadequate: Africa is expected to receive only \$195 billion by 2035, a fraction of the \$1.6 trillion required.

Regional development banks are well-positioned to help close this gap by localizing climate finance through innovative pooled funds and aligning environmental restoration with inclusive development. Through its Africa Adaptation Acceleration Program (AAAP), the African Development Bank (AfDB) targets adaptation finance to fragile states and community-led initiatives. Backed by the Africa Climate Change Fund (involving multiple donor contributions through the AfDB), AAAP supports women- and youth-led enterprises in climate-smart agriculture and clean energy, promoting gender-responsive, locally driven implementation across Africa.

In 2024, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) launched a \$1 billion Amazonia Bond Issuance Program to raise private capital to fund forest protection, biodiversity conservation, and livelihoods across Amazon countries. Using a framework that links financial disbursements to measurable social and environmental outcomes, the initiative seeks to align climate goals with justice-driven development. The IDB has also pledged to increase its overall climate finance, in 2025, to at least \$11 billion.

Meanwhile, the Asian Development Bank's ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility supports ASEAN governments with over \$1 billion in technical assistance and blended finance to accelerate climate-smart infrastructure.

Major gaps remain in climate finance governance and delivery, with local actors often excluded from decisions. To advance combined socioeconomic and environmental justice goals, finance must go beyond carbon emissions reduction to address underlying vulnerabilities. Regional Development Banks engaged in climate finance should prioritize equity in project design, establish inclusive safeguards, and expand participatory governance.

Source: Original Box, Stimson Center. Data sources: Martinez, et al, *Partnering for Finance Adaptation*; Buchner, et al, *Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2023*; Inter-American Development Bank, “IDB and World Bank Launch New Amazonia Bond Issuance Program”; Jessop, et al, “Exclusive: IDB seeks to unlock \$11 billion-plus for sustainability goals”; ADB, *ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility (ACGF)*; Tye and Suarez, “Locally Led Climate Adaptation.”

To be equitable and accessible to affected stakeholders, data trusts must be grounded in consent, local ownership, and data justice principles.<sup>252</sup> Data governance must also be transparent and people-centered. Enhanced oversight, audit institutions, and data-driven systems can reinforce democratic control of data. Without these safeguards, the widespread sharing of data could reproduce some of the same inequities as seen in global finance. Regional Civic Data Trusts, alongside other innovative regional initiatives (as

detailed below), are poised to leverage the benefits of data-sharing and wider economic integration, while mitigating inherent risks by ensuring that data rights are protected.

The Pact for the Future called for rebalancing the global economy through redistribution and capacity-building aligned with local priorities. Rebalancing global trade and finance requires confronting the structural inequalities that have long marginalized the Global South. Many African economies remain stuck exporting low-value raw materials, while struggling to grow industries and access markets — a pattern rooted in extractive colonial systems that funneled resources to Europe and left domestic industries underdeveloped.

Partially in response, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a potentially transformative step that aims to facilitate trade among Africa’s 54 countries, lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty, and increase incomes for tens of millions more.<sup>253</sup> The AfCFTA reduces intra-African tariffs on 90% of goods, simplifies customs procedures, and creates a single market of over 1.4 billion people.<sup>254</sup>

To also ensure digital and economic sovereignty, the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol should be operationalized as a market access condition to ensure that data rights are protected. This would promote digital public infrastructure that, in turn, supports regional value chains.<sup>255</sup> Such an approach would keep value within the continent, strengthen regional supply chains, and reduce dependence on external markets. The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade further acknowledges the barriers women face in accessing finance, training, and social protection, recognizing that without targeted measures, historically marginalized groups risk exclusion from the benefits of regional economic integration.<sup>256</sup>

From Regional Civic Data Trusts and regional digital trade with vulnerable group protocols to other kinds of regional initiatives, developing countries are collectively advancing new models of regional governance. In helping to rebalance the global economy through redistribution and capacity-building aligned with local priorities, some core characteristics of these regional initiatives — which should be nurtured and further scaled-up to expand reach and overall impact — are their emphasis on protecting data rights, reducing inequality, and expanding socioeconomic development opportunities through decision-making grounded in local realities and priorities.

Regional development cooperation is contributing to the profound shifts underway across the Global South, enabling developing countries to collectively address shared challenges, such as digital public infrastructure gaps or the protection of data rights, with regionally tailored solutions. By centering social equity and ownership, these regional innovations are redefining the purpose and structure of development cooperation globally, which remains central to achieving a more just and inclusive future for all.

## ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

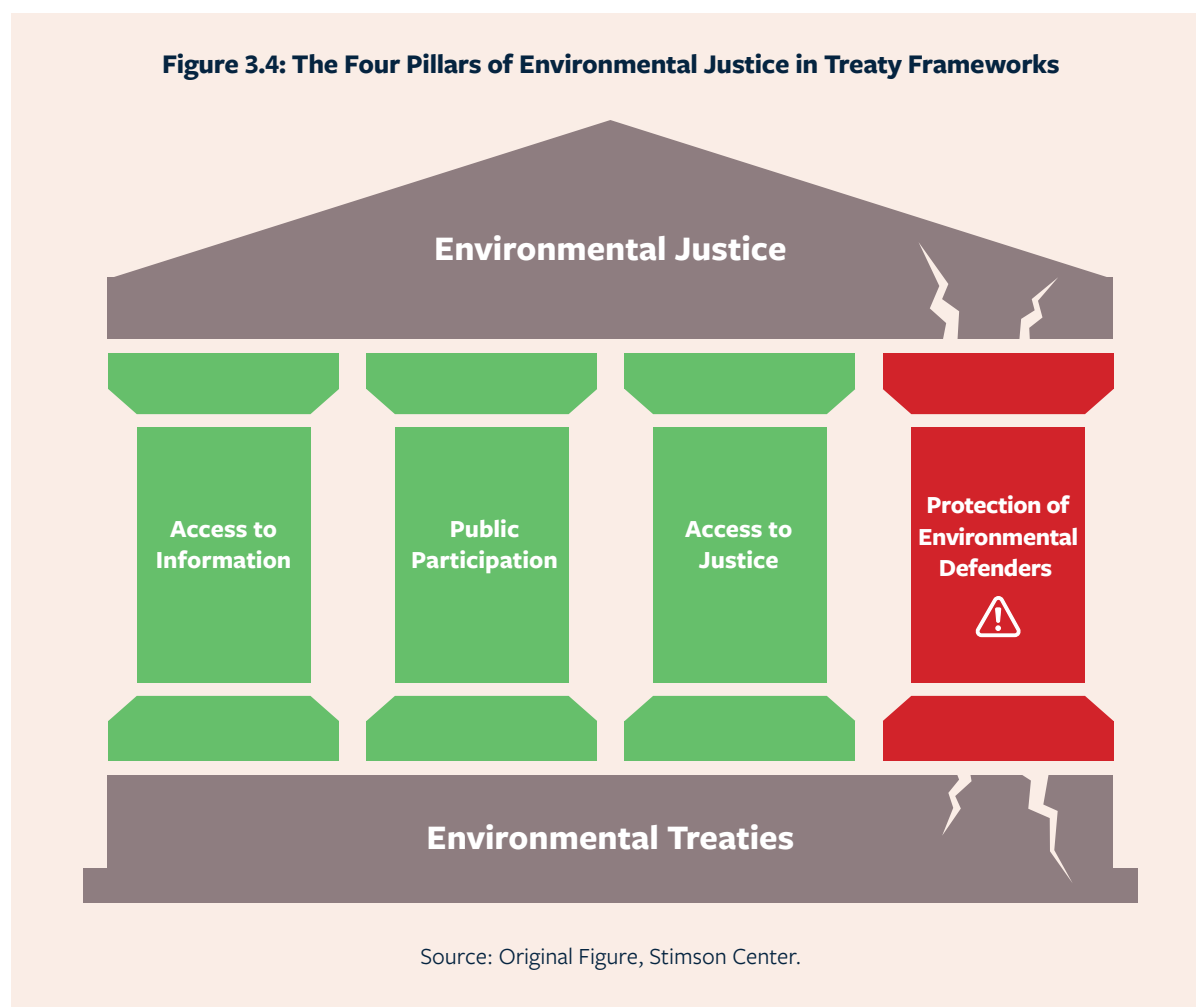
As momentum builds toward a just, green transition, the role of regional environmental treaties in addressing the triple planetary crisis — climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution — has become increasingly urgent. Without robust compliance mechanisms or protections for those defending the environment, their potential remains unrealized. UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently declared that “the fossil fuel age is nearing its end,” underscoring the need for governance systems that can deliver justice alongside decarbonization.<sup>257</sup> Targeted reforms to embed enforcement, safeguard environmental defenders, and strengthen the credibility and impact of regional environmental agreements are urgently needed.

## Embed Strong Protections for Environmental Defenders in Regional Environmental Treaties

In 2022, over 177 environmental defenders — individuals and communities safeguarding land, water, and environmental rights — were killed, mostly in Latin America. This underscores that rights cannot be realized if those who defend them are not protected through legal safeguards, rapid response mechanisms, and accountability for those responsible for violent attacks.<sup>258</sup> The Escazú Agreement within Latin America and the Caribbean is the first legally binding treaty to explicitly include defender protections (Article 9), positioning safety alongside access to information, participation, and justice.<sup>259</sup> Yet implementation remains weak, and where legal safeguards do exist, impunity is still widespread.

***Rights cannot be realized if those who defend them are not protected through legal safeguards, rapid response mechanisms, and accountability for those responsible for violent attacks.***

Figure 3.4 shows that most regional environmental treaties uphold three pillars — access to information, participation, and justice — while neglecting the fourth: defender protection. Without this critical pillar, environmental justice remains fragile.



In Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution governs air pollution and deforestation crises but lacks provisions that protect environmental defenders. Civil society groups, such as Walhi and Jikalahari, have documented the systematic intimidation of local activists opposing plantation expansion, highlighting a glaring omission in the treaty's design.<sup>260</sup> Similarly, Africa's Great Green Wall (GGW) initiative offers no framework for defender safety, even as violence continues to threaten organizers leading environmental restoration efforts.<sup>261</sup>

The renewable energy transition poses additional risks for defenders in high-growth project areas. Over half of future wind and nearly two-thirds of solar projects are planned in countries with restricted civic space. In Brazil, Honduras, Mozambique, and the Philippines, defenders report harassment, surveillance, and violence directly linked to green energy development.<sup>262</sup> In response to these threats, the Aarhus Convention within Europe offers a useful model through its Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, which provides rapid response mechanisms for defenders at risk.<sup>263</sup> While not a judicial body, it institutionalizes protection monitoring, a model Escazú's Compliance Committee could emulate.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has strengthened legal protections for environmental rights, recognizing the right to a healthy environment as justiciable (OC-23/17) and issuing binding rulings like *Lhaka Honhat v. Argentina* (2020) to uphold Indigenous rights. In July 2025, it declared the climate crisis a human rights emergency and affirmed states' binding duty to protect environmental defenders.<sup>264</sup> Drawing on Escazú, it called on states to investigate threats, punish perpetrators, and ensure justice — establishing defender protection as a legal duty, not just a policy goal. This jurisprudence offers a promising enforcement pathway for Escazú, treating environmental rights as an extension of broader human rights obligations.<sup>265</sup>

Escazú's Compliance Committee currently lacks enforcement authority, as it can only issue non-binding recommendations and cannot impose penalties.<sup>266</sup> To strengthen defender protections, states must be required to enact domestic laws that reflect the treaty's commitments, including Article 9, which obliges parties to guarantee a safe environment for individuals and groups defending environmental rights. Regional treaties should also establish rapid response mechanisms, modeled on the Aarhus Convention's Special Rapporteur, to provide urgent support to defenders facing threats. Conditioning access to climate and development finance on the presence of effective defender safeguards would further incentivize compliance, turning symbolic commitments into enforceable obligations.

The absence of defender protections in the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution and Africa's Great Green Wall initiative represents a critical oversight. In Southeast Asia, integrating safety guarantees into haze governance would help to protect frontline activists and align with the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration's recognition of environmental rights. In Africa, the GGW could adopt regional defender protocols to reflect the reality that land restoration and climate resilience depend on unthreatened, empowered local leadership.

These reforms further echo recommendations from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, which underscores the importance of Indigenous and local knowledge in environmental stewardship.<sup>267</sup> Upholding defender protections through legal incorporation, regional safeguards, and climate finance conditionality can ensure that environmental justice is not sidelined — and that climate and broader environmental action does not come at the cost of human lives.

## Strengthen Compliance Mechanisms in Regional Environmental Agreements

Regional environmental treaties like the Escazú Agreement for Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa's Great Green Wall, and the ASEAN Haze Agreement hold promise for advancing justice, resilience, and cooperation but still remain largely aspirational — and poorly implemented — without effective transparency, enforcement, and compliance mechanisms.<sup>268</sup> The Escazú Agreement is legally binding, but its compliance committee can only play a facilitative role, with no power to issue formal non-compliance findings or escalate violations.<sup>269</sup> The GGW lacks formal monitoring which weakens accountability, while the binding ASEAN Haze Agreement is hindered by non-interference norms and lacks dispute resolution mechanisms, penalties, and corporate accountability.<sup>270</sup>

Binding enforcement drives environmental compliance. The Montreal Protocol's trade restrictions on non-parties incentivized global participation by turning ozone protection into a coordination problem.<sup>271</sup> Similarly, the US–Peru Trade Promotion Agreement incorporated forest protections into its trade dispute system, pushing Peru to implement conservation reforms under threat of sanctions.<sup>272</sup> The Aarhus Convention in Europe, extended to Latin America and the Caribbean through the Escazú Agreement after Rio+20, shows how regional access and compliance rights can be replicated. Similar conventions in Africa and Asia, where initiatives like the Great Green Wall and ASEAN Haze Agreement lack enforceable citizen safeguards, would fill current gaps in environmental governance. In contrast, voluntary pacts with only advisory committees often fail to drive meaningful change.<sup>273</sup>

To strengthen regional environmental governance, compliance bodies should be empowered to issue non-compliance findings to violators, circulate these findings publicly, and recommend corrective actions. In the case of Escazú, this could include escalating serious violations to the Conference of Parties to the treaty to generate reputational pressure. Treaties like the ASEAN Haze Agreement should be revised to include binding dispute resolution systems — such as arbitration and enforceable penalties for non-compliance — along with corporate liability measures to address the role of companies in driving fires and other deforestation measures.

***Similar conventions in Africa and Asia, where initiatives like the Great Green Wall and ASEAN Haze Agreement lack enforceable citizen safeguards, would fill current gaps in environmental governance. In contrast, voluntary pacts with only advisory committees often fail to drive meaningful change.***

Regional courts also offer important legal pathways. The Inter-American Court, for instance, has affirmed the right to a healthy environment and upheld this precedent in such landmark rulings as *Lhaka Honhat v. Argentina* (2020).<sup>274</sup> The ICJ's 2025 advisory opinion on states' climate obligations further strengthens this foundation, clarifying that states have binding duties to prevent and remedy climate harm (as detailed in section two of this report). This global interpretation provides a baseline that regional treaties like Escazú can translate into enforceable norms.<sup>275</sup> Finally, treaty compliance can be strengthened by linking implementation to market access and eligibility for climate finance, following the precedent set by the Montreal Protocol and U.S.–Peru Trade Promotion Agreement.

These recommendations align with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and now Sevilla Commitment’s emphasis on effective follow-up, review, and accountability frameworks, as well as the recent Climate COPs’ calls for implementation and ambition to be pursued with equal urgency.<sup>276</sup> Regional frameworks in Oceania, such as the Pacific Community, the Pacific Islands Forum, and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, demonstrate how regional cooperation can advance environmental justice.<sup>277</sup> By adopting enforceable compliance mechanisms, regional environmental treaties can move beyond goodwill commitments toward greater accountability (and “beyond promises to progress,” as conveyed in the title of this FIC’25 report). This will help to protect environmental rights, achieve climate goals, and advance justice for the communities and ecosystems these international legal instruments are meant to serve and protect.

## Bottlenecks and Spoilers

In the face of stalled multilateral cooperation, regional governance organizations are well positioned to offer more localized solutions to political-judicial injustice, socioeconomic inequality, and environmental threats. While challenges around authority and enforcement persist, greater intraregional political support and financial and technical investment in regional initiatives can help to strengthen their governance roles. At the same time, many developing countries of the Global South remain cautious of moving toward anything resembling supranational governance structures that might impose binding control, given colonial legacies. Yet, regional bodies can address such concerns of national sovereignty and technical scope through representative, consensus-based decision-making frameworks.

*Against the backdrop of these hard-nosed and sometimes difficult realities, both regional and global institutions still hold out the promise of working closely with national and sub-national partners in promoting and safeguarding justice, especially when open to innovation and political renewal.*

While regional organizations have become more open, dynamic, and multidimensional, many continue to struggle with institutional legitimacy.<sup>278</sup> If confidence in global multilateral approaches continues to decline, however, the role of regional bodies may possibly grow, offering countries new opportunities for greater inclusion, recognition, and agency. At the same time, regional organizations continue to struggle to assert a clear role due to overlapping mandates with both national bodies and global institutions, such as the United Nations and World Bank, while their often-times limited bureaucratic and technical capacity and financial resources add to perceived duplication and fragmentation. In some cases, emerging regional powers dominate agenda-setting, sidelining less influential members and undermining perceptions of shared ownership and collaboration.

Against the backdrop of these hard-nosed and sometimes difficult realities, both regional and global institutions still hold out the promise of working closely with national and sub-national partners in promoting and safeguarding justice, especially when open to innovation and political renewal. Fortunately, the series of summits now underway — including last year’s Summit of the Future and this year’s Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and World Social Summit — provide positive, future-oriented multistakeholder platforms for change that can harness key attributes of regional and global governance actors, a subject to which we now turn.



## IV. From the SOTF and FfD4 to the World Social Summit: Fighting Injustice Worldwide

*“Clearly, any definition of a culture of peace must address the problem of achieving justice for communities and individuals who do not have the means to compete or cope without structured assistance and compassionate help.”*

—Mahnaz Afkami, Iranian-American Human Rights Activist<sup>279</sup>

In the wake of the socioeconomic fallout from the COVID-19 crisis and attendant “crisis of global governance,” last year’s (September 22-23, 2024 in New York) Summit of the Future (SOTF) galvanized attention worldwide on rebuilding trust and gaps in global governance; reaffirming the UN Charter, 2030 Agenda, and other existing commitments; and renewing the multilateral system to prepare for over-the-horizon challenges and opportunities.<sup>280</sup> Taking forward many of the SOTF’s agreed commitments (including Actions 4 and 47-52 on financing for development and international financial architecture reform), this year’s (30 June to 3 July, 2025 in Seville) Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) sought to catalyze investments at scale for sustainable development, address the twin, inter-related debt and development crises, and advance concrete international financial architecture reforms.<sup>281</sup>

Both the SOTF and FfD4 are poised to buttress — across this report’s focus on the political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions of justice — the upcoming Second World Summit for Social Development, planned for November 4-6, 2025 in Doha. Also known simply as the “World Social Summit,” it will advance the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through efforts to eradicate poverty, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, and promote social integration.<sup>282</sup>

This final section of the *Future of International Cooperation Report 2025* (FIC’25) explores the multiple, potential “win-win” linkages between the Summit of the Future, Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and the World Social Summit. Progress in both promoting and safeguarding justice, in all its forms, depends on the respective success of each of these three global diplomatic gatherings and their follow-through, in identifying and pursuing the deep and varied connections between them. The report further examines concrete entry points for the SOTF, FfD4, and World Social Summit action agendas through several “justice in action” innovations in the spaces of global and regional governance (as introduced in sections [two](#) and [three](#) of this report, respectively). FIC’25 concludes with some final reflections on seizing the moment and advancing the Summit of the Future, Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and World Social Summit’s goals and specific commitments, drawing inspiration from the international cooperation principles of diplomacy, dialogue, and diversity.

## Leveraging Summit of the Future and Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development Commitments to Maximize World Social Summit Outcomes

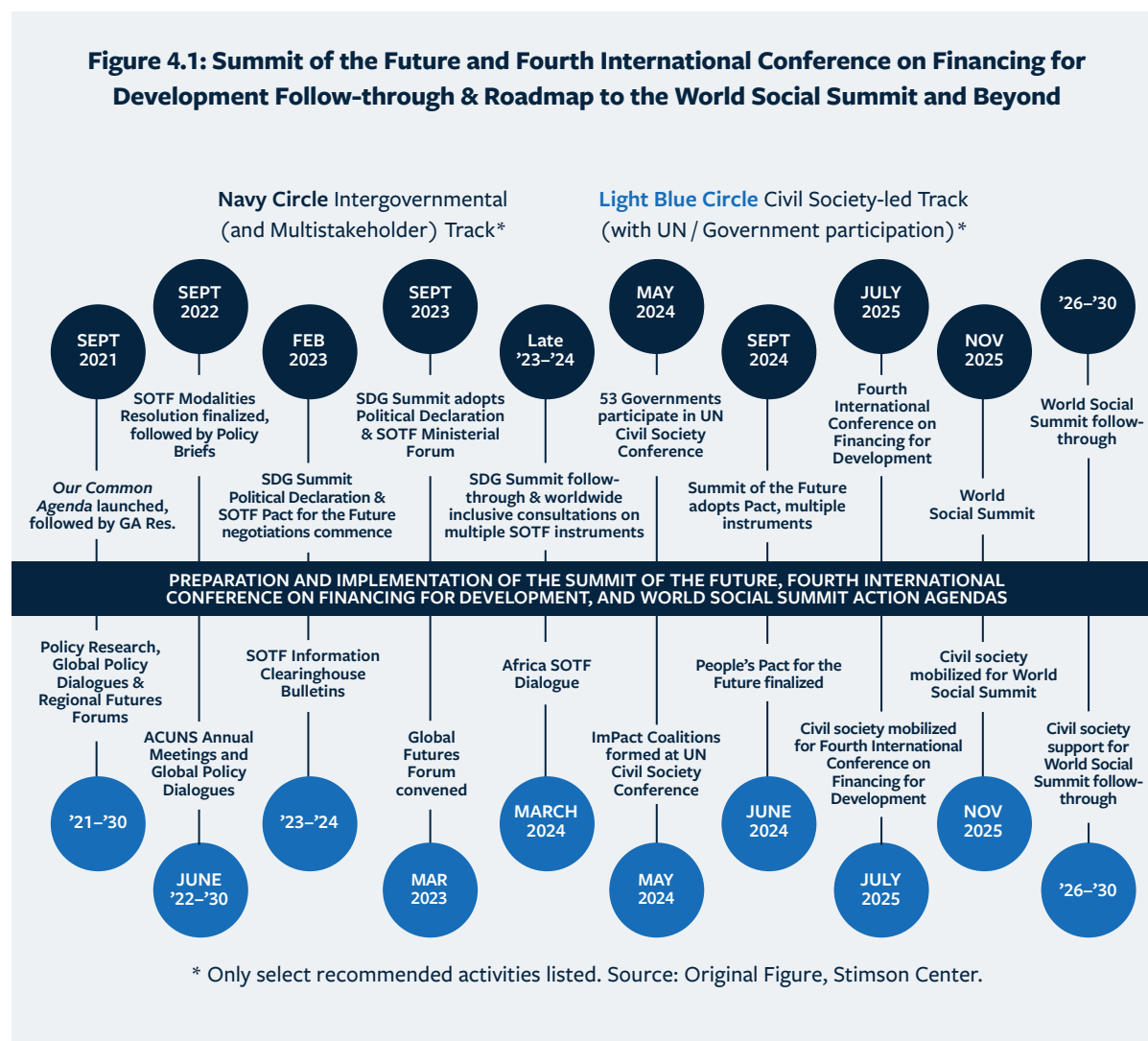
With its focus on modernizing the UN system to better cope with current and emerging risks and to create larger opportunities, the Summit of the Future's Pact for the Future outcome document is well-placed to advance justice-related goals of the forthcoming World Social Summit. Several examples include: i) addressing many of the root causes of extreme poverty, especially through the Pact's Chapter One on "Sustainable development and financing for development" Actions 1-12 and Chapter Five on "Transforming global governance" Actions 47-52 on international financial architecture reform; ii) working to curtail excessive unemployment, particularly in Pact Actions 2, 5, 6, 8, 28-31, and 34; and iii) and fighting social exclusion, including in Pact Actions 6-8, 11, 13, 16, 18-20, 32, 35-37, 46, and 53.<sup>283</sup> Additionally, it is critical for UN Member States to leverage the Secretary-General's sweeping UN80 Initiative now underway to help advance, rather than detract from, the ambitious Pact for the Future, by creating a more agile, cost-effective, and impactful UN system.<sup>284</sup>

Similarly, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development underscores the emergence of a new path for international cooperation, based on three fundamental principles: maximizing development impact, giving Global South countries greater voice and influence over financial and debt structures, and strengthening country leadership and country-led initiatives.<sup>285</sup> Taking forward the FfD4's Sevilla Commitment and Platform for Action reinforces the forthcoming World Social Summit in Doha's action agenda by, for instance: i) fighting poverty and inequality, while seeking to raise public revenue, through the promotion of progressive and efficient fiscal systems; ii) encouraging decent job creation at scale through national innovation strategies designed to realize the full potential of science, technology, and innovation; and iii) confronting all forms of discrimination as a serious impediment to economic and social development, including racism, xenophobia, and related intolerance.<sup>286</sup>

In the spirit of this *Future of International Cooperation Report* series' encouragement of creative thinking and empirically grounded debate on expanding the boundaries of global and regional problem-solving, [figure 4.1](#) offers some guidance for governments (top row, including representatives from international organizations) to consider — these next twelve months and beyond — alongside suggestions for civil society (bottom row, including representatives from religious organizations, the media, and business community) to leverage Summit of the Future and Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development follow-through to maximize this year's World Social Summit outcomes and broader sustainable development, peace, justice objectives. The stakes could not be higher and the road ahead more difficult and complex, as the cycle of negotiating modalities, revisions, and agreeing on action-oriented outcome documents creates a virtuous, mutually reinforcing, and ever-more ambitious set of high-level diplomatic gatherings.

Together, the SOTF and FfD4 provide practical strategies, operational tools, and financing guidance for delivering on the World Social Summit's commitment to poverty eradication, low unemployment and sustainable livelihoods, and social inclusion. These ambitious, generational reform programs are also building momentum for this Doha summit's Political Declaration and the closely related theme of justice across (and even within) borders. Despite the move away from global cooperation in some countries and regions, many global and regional institutions are demonstrating resilience and a penchant for

modernization through SOTF and FfD4 follow-through, helping to build high-level political confidence and galvanize broad-based support for sustained multilateral action.



To realize the full potential of the Pact for the Future, Sevilla Commitment, and World Social Summit's anticipated Political Declaration, potential spoilers and bottlenecks to progress must be overcome. Well-designed coordination mechanisms, as well as robust monitoring and evaluation, are also essential for effective follow-through, including for identifying and undertaking course corrections in response to stark implementation gaps. Harnessing the ideas, networks, and unique capabilities of a diverse coalition of champion governments, international civil servants, and partners in civil society and the private sector hold immense promise for driving forward together the inextricably linked SOTF, FfD4, and World Social Summit programs for change. Creating new and sustained opportunities for promoting and safeguarding justice, across its multiple dimensions, is also engendered when state and non-state actors continue to explore and seize new opportunities for global and regional governance innovation, as argued in sections [two](#) and [three](#) of this report and further elaborated below.

## Global and Regional Justice in Action: The World Social Summit Political Declaration

The World Social Summit's Political Declaration (finalized on September 5, 2025 in New York for adoption at the November 4–6, 2025 summit in Doha) underscores the pressing need to confront deep-rooted social challenges, particularly poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. The Declaration stresses that overcoming these challenges demands an integrated approach in which efforts are mutually reinforcing. The *Future of International Cooperation Report 2025*, which highlights closely related principles of justice, ties into these efforts. As the Declaration states, “We share the conviction that social development and social justice are indispensable for the achievement and maintenance of peace and security within and among our nations. In turn, social development and social justice cannot be attained in the absence of peace and security, or in the absence of respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>287</sup>

Similarly, justice writ large, as underscored in this report, cannot be achieved without peace, security, respect for human rights, and fundamental freedoms. Commitments to these principles must be matched by concrete implementation and follow-through to the World Social Summit, in line with the pledges made at the SOTF and FfD4. Together, these three consecutive summits underscore the urgent need to reinvigorate multilateral action to advance social development and justice across its political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions.

The SDGs, the Pact for the Future, the FfD4 Sevilla Commitment, and the World Social Summit's Political Declaration underscore the urgent need for collective governance and UN reform ([figure 4.2](#)). They all reflect a shared responsibility for ending extreme poverty, securing sustainable development financing, and promoting inclusion — especially for youth, women, and in peace and security efforts. Less pronounced in these three global instruments — with strong regional, national, and sub-national implications too — are concerns for climate governance, civil society engagement, and the upholding of international law. There is, nonetheless, growing interest in the role of technology, closing the digital divide, the governance of outer space, and measuring progress beyond GDP.

The current moment must serve as a turning point for global and regional governance by bringing together past commitments, advancing the UN80 Initiative, and breathing new life into global agendas. These include the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Climate Agreement, the earlier Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and beyond, all of which must be continuously renewed and made reinforcing to drive collective progress. Amid today's crisis of multilateralism, justice must be placed at the forefront to confront challenges of legitimacy.

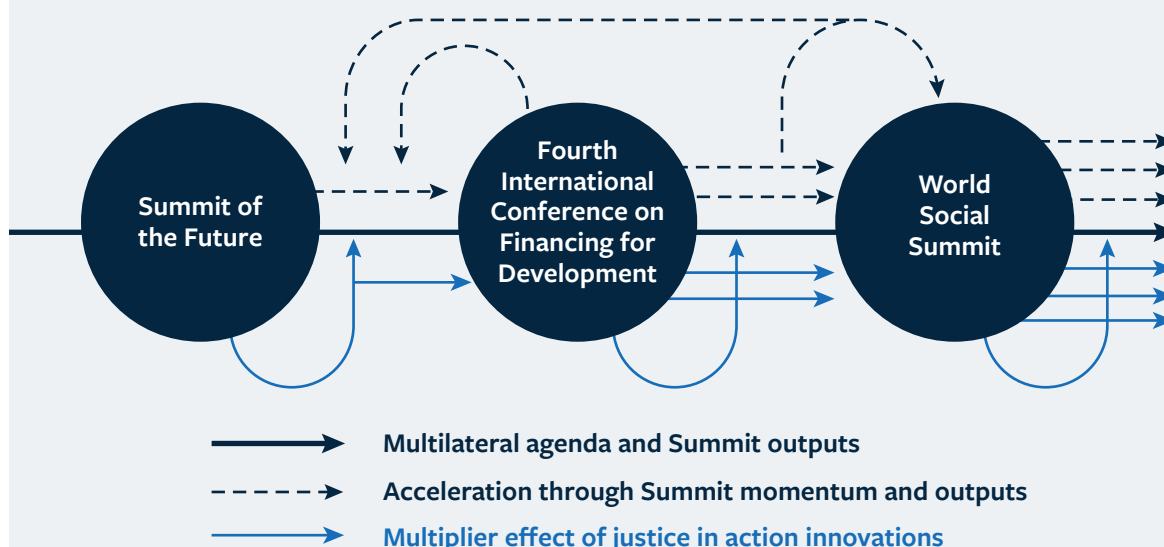
Global agendas should harness innovation to guide UN Member States on a path that generates positive multiplier effects for their citizens and helps to restore their trust in the multilateral system. This moment calls for reflection on the future of global governance, making it useful to view the present round of closely linked summits as acceleration points for identifying and advancing solutions ([figure 4.3](#)). This framing also highlights the importance of the periods between summits, where the challenging work of implementing and monitoring newly adopted action agendas occurs.

**Figure 4.2: From SDGs to the Pact for the Future and FfD4 to the World Social Summit — What’s “The Through-Line?”**

<div>SDGs</div> <div><div><div>1. No Poverty</div><div>2. Zero Hunger</div><div>3. Good Health and Well-Being</div><div>4. Quality Education</div><div>5. Gender Equality</div><div>6. Clean Water and Sanitation</div><div>7. Affordable and Clean Energy</div><div>8. Decent Work and Economic Growth</div><div>9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure</div><div>10.Reduced Inequalities</div><div>11.Sustainable Cities and Communities</div><div>12.Responsible Consumption and Production</div><div>13.Climate Action</div><div>14. Life Below Water</div><div>15. Life On Land</div><div>16.Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions</div><div>17.Partnerships for the Goals</div></div></div>		<div>Pact for the Future</div> <div><div><div>1. Sustainable Development and Financing for Development</div><div>2. International Peace and Security</div><div>3. Science, Technology, and Innovation and Digital Cooperation</div><div>4. Youth and Future Generations</div><div>5. Transforming Global Governance</div></div></div>
<div>Fourth International Conference On Financing For Development</div> <div><div><div>1. Domestic Public Resources</div><div>2. Domestic and International Private Business and Finance</div><div>3. International Development Cooperation and Development Effectiveness</div><div>4. International Trade as an Engine for Development</div><div>5. Debt and Debt Sustainability</div><div>6. International Financial Architecture and Systemic Issues</div><div>7. Science, Technology, Innovation, and Capacity-building</div><div>8. Data, Monitoring, and Follow-up</div></div></div>		<div>World Social Summit</div> <div>(Finalized Political Declaration for adoption in Doha)</div> <div><div><div>1. Social Development for all</div><div>2. Eradication of Poverty</div><div>3. Full and Productive Employment and Decent Work for All</div><div>4. Social Integration</div><div>5. Right to Food</div><div>6. Physical and Mental Health to Meet Universal Health Coverage</div><div>7. Harnessing Technology and Artificial Intelligence to Advance Social Development and Close the Digital Divide</div><div>8. Quality Education</div><div>9. Address Climate Change, Biodiversity Loss, Desertification, Drought, and Environmental Degradation</div><div>10. Disaster Risk Reduction</div><div>11. Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls</div><div>12. Fight against all forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, Religious Hatred, Stigmatization, and Hate Speech</div><div>13. Adequate housing, Urbanization, Water and Sanitation, Electricity, Digital Infrastructure, and Connectivity and Transport</div><div>14. Safe, Regular Migration Pathways</div><div>15. Financing for Social Development</div></div></div>
<div>What themes have been consistent?</div> <div><div><div>▶ Ending Extreme Poverty</div><div>▶ Financing for Sustainable Development</div><div>▶ Empowering Women</div><div>▶ Future-awareness</div><div>▶ Peace &amp; Security</div><div>▶ Youth Empowerment &amp; Inclusion</div><div>▶ Collective Governance</div><div>▶ Prevention</div><div>▶ United Nations Reform</div></div></div>	<div>Which topics have taken a back-seat?</div> <div><div><div>▶ Democracy &amp; Anti-Corruption</div><div>▶ Climate Governance</div><div>▶ Human Rights</div><div>▶ Civil Society</div><div>▶ International Law</div></div></div>	<div>What’s new?</div> <div><div><div>▶ Role of Science, Technology &amp; Innovation for Peace, Security, Development, and Protecting the Environment</div><div>▶ Governing Outer Space</div><div>▶ Bridging the Digital Divide</div><div>▶ Local &amp; Traditional Knowledge Integration</div><div>▶ Measuring Progress (Beyond GDP)</div><div>▶ Global Governance Reform Both Within and Beyond the UN</div><div>▶ Disarmament &amp; Non-Proliferation</div></div></div>

Source: Original Figure, Stimson Center. Data Sources: United Nations, *Pact for the Future*; United Nations, *World Social Summit Political Declaration (Finalized on September 5, 2025 in New York for adoption November 4-6, 2025 in Doha)*; United Nations, *Outcome Document of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development*.

**Figure 4.3: Acceleration and Multiplier Effects from the Summit of the Future to FfD4 to the World Social Summit**



Source: Original Figure, Stimson Center.

A through-line from these summits has been the importance of collective and collaborative governance in achieving the stated goals. The SDGs emphasized this through Goal 17 on Partnerships for the Goal. The Summit of the Future was marked by frequent stakeholder consultations (including the May 2024 UN Civil Society Conference in Nairobi), a practice that continues as the President of the UN General Assembly and UN Secretary-General have brought together Member States and civil society to advance implementation and monitoring of the Pact for the Future. At FfD4, nearly all UN Member States signed the final outcome document, a remarkable achievement made possible by dedicated diplomacy, tireless work by international civil servants, and civil society advocacy.<sup>288</sup> As we look ahead to the 2025 World Social Summit, prioritizing multistakeholder approaches to governance is essential. To truly address a comprehensive view of injustice, inclusive decision-making and diverse voices must be placed at the center.

The following illustrates how sections [two](#) and [three](#) of this report seek to build inclusive approaches to tackling political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental injustice through global and regional governance reforms. These approaches seek to capitalize on the through-line of opportunities for positive change present in the outcomes of the SOTF, FfD4, and upcoming World Social Summit.

## GLOBAL JUST

## GLOBAL JUSTICE IN ACTION: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Section [two](#) of this report considers six global governance innovations (three underscored below) for promoting justice in connection with its political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions. Global governance faces a crisis of legitimacy, as unequal and outdated institutions — combined with inadequate progress on expanding access to justice, curtailing inequality, and combatting environmental



threats — demand urgent reform to meet current global challenges and opportunities. Policy proposals highlight the need to expand the scope of global governance and to establish dedicated bodies within existing frameworks to more effectively address challenges such as climate change and the protection of economic, social, and cultural rights. The Pact for the Future, FfD4, and the anticipated Political Declaration of the World Social Summit all underscore the urgency of confronting inequities and advancing justice through reformed multilateral cooperation.

***Expand the ICJ and ICC’s Reach through Political Support, Compromissory Clauses, and Advisory Opinions.*** International justice is under growing strain amid rising geopolitical tensions, selective compliance, and the erosion of global norms, underscoring the urgent need for renewed commitment and reform to deliver effective legal solutions through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC). While the further development and defense of international law has taken a back seat in recent UN summits, it remains a vital facet of ensuring justice and remedy for major global issues. The World Social Summit’s forthcoming Political Declaration acknowledges the role of international law in tackling poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion, but it falls short of proposing concrete measures to strengthen its effectiveness.<sup>289</sup> Alongside broader efforts to generate greater political support for the ICJ’s compulsory jurisdiction (and the ICC’s authorities too mandated through the Rome Statute), an appealing additional solution is to designate the International Court of Justice as arbiter of future summit-related international agreements. Tying jurisdiction to these instruments through such “compromissory clauses” would strengthen enforcement, because states could not reject judgments without repudiating the agreements themselves. The General Assembly should also (and the UN Secretary-General granted the same authority to) make greater use of ICJ advisory opinions to proactively clarify and develop international law pertaining to concrete World Social Summit outcomes.

***Bolster Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights through UN Human Rights Council Innovations.*** Closing the socioeconomic justice gap requires implementing universal human rights with enforcement mechanisms that hold states and corporations accountable. The Pact for the Future stresses the right to development, alongside civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (Actions 7 and 46).<sup>290</sup> This framing highlights how strengthening economic, social, and cultural rights mutually reinforces and supports all other human rights. The UN Human Rights Council has increasingly emphasized economic, social, and cultural rights (such as food, employment, education, and health), as well as highlighting issues like regressive taxation and illicit financial flows as structural injustices that impede their realization. Reforms to strengthen its promotion of these rights could include introducing a “compliance scorecard” in Universal Periodic Review sessions, adopting majority-voting for procedural decisions to prevent deadlock, linking human rights obligations to global fiscal governance through support for the UN Tax Convention now under negotiation, helping Member States effectively incorporate these rights into national laws and international agreements, and more closely engaging the Council with strengthened regional and national human rights bodies to facilitate greater regional and domestic action.

***Establish a United Nations Climate Change Council.*** The world continues to face the existential triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. While key agreements like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Climate Agreement guide global climate action, an effective coordinating body is still urgently needed to streamline follow-on decision-making, connect across all three pillars of the crisis, and enforce implementation and compliance. The newly proposed UN Climate Change Council could ensure permanent high-level representation from influential countries and meaningful participation by other relevant stakeholders on fundamental climate issues, directly supporting

implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. A “Just Transition Review and Response” tool, for tracking progress and recommending corrective actions to help countries deliver better on their Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, and Global Stocktake, could aid the intergovernmental body’s work. The Council would further help to deliver on the Pact for the Future’s climate and broader environment-related goals (see Actions 9, 10, and 52) and the Sevilla Commitment’s climate finance-related pledge.

## REGNL JUST

## REGIONAL JUSTICE IN ACTION: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

With waning support for multilateral organizations and collaboration in some influential countries, there is renewed interest and a growing need to promote justice and action through regional governance structures. While challenges in legitimacy and resources to effective regional action remain, section [three](#) of this report highlights opportunities for tackling justice through regional governance. Specifically, it proposes six entry points (three emphasized below) to improve regional governance when advancing justice in the political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental realms.

### ***Prioritize Issue-Specific Judicial Competencies and Training for Regional Human Rights Courts.***

Regional human rights courts in Africa, the Americas, and Europe (and hopefully, someday in the Arab region and Asia too) play a critical role in advancing political and judicial justice by providing an additional layer of accountability and adjudication tools, especially when domestic institutions are weak, biased, or compromised. At the same time, strengthening their judicial competencies through issue-based training and continuous education on topics such as inequality and environmental justice can improve the capacity of regional human rights courts to deliver fair and effective rulings. As emphasized by the World Social Summit’s forthcoming Political Declaration, the need for strengthened institutional accountability and universal access to justice, while fostering coordination and inclusivity across all levels of governance, is vital to enhancing institutional capacity and accountability.<sup>291</sup> Specialized human rights bodies and officials would provide deeper expertise, promote more consistent jurisprudence, and expedite case resolution — ultimately strengthening access to justice within a regional context. Establishing regional human rights courts with issue-specific competencies on diverse issues (including environmental harm, cybercrime, labor rights, and discrimination in healthcare and education) would enhance institutional capacity and make regional justice systems more responsive to evolving societal challenges.

***Promote Pooled Regional Investment Funds through Regional Development Banks.*** Persistent debt burdens and limited access to affordable finance remain major structural obstacles to achieving sustainable development in many developing countries. At FfD4, emphasis was placed on strengthening regional financial institutions to better address the unique structural challenges of least developed countries and conflict-affected states.<sup>292</sup> The anticipated Political Declaration of the World Social Summit similarly stresses that ensuring equitable, sustainable financing for social protection and poverty eradication programs is key to reducing inequality, fostering inclusion, and promoting a sustainable economy for all.<sup>293</sup> The creation of pooled regional investment funds through Regional Development Banks can promote investment in underfunded areas such as the informal economy, localized agricultural chains, and social services. Unlike traditional loans or grants, these funds offer equity investment to social enterprises, cooperatives, and communities supporting women-led informal cooperatives, Indigenous peoples, and youth-led green startups. Their further encouragement at the World Social Summit would enable fairer concessional financing, more responsive development cooperation (including through new social metrics like gender pay equity), and inclusion through greater community ownership.

***Strengthen Compliance Mechanisms in Regional Environmental Agreements.*** Ensuring compliance remains a critical challenge to making regional environmental agreements effective and resilient in tackling the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda and now its successor, the Sevilla Commitment, emphasize effective follow-up, review, and accountability frameworks for development and climate financing, and Actions 9, 10, and 52 of the Pact for the Future speak to the need for greater accountability in the climate and broader environmental governance space. In this spirit, regional environmental treaties should adopt enforceable compliance mechanisms to ensure greater accountability in their implementation.<sup>294</sup> Specifically, this requires empowering regional compliance bodies to issue non-compliance findings, ensure public transparency, and recommend corrective actions. Additionally, linking treaty implementation to greater market access and climate finance eligibility would provide stronger incentives for compliance.

## **The Way Forward for Global Justice: Diplomacy, Dialogue, and Diversity**

Under the banner of “Diplomacy, Dialogue, and Diversity,” the Doha Forum has, for over two decades, promoted a spirited and open interchange of ideas to innovate and improve international policy-making through action-oriented networks. Informed by this *Future of International Cooperation 2025* report on the theme “Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress,” this year’s Doha Forum (December 6-7, 2025) will further explore ways to fully leverage the generational opportunities provided by the convening and follow-through of the back-to-back, closely intertwined 2024 Summit of the Future, 2025 Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and 2025 World Social Summit. In doing so, the Doha Forum encourages and advances creative thinking and empirically grounded debate on revitalizing global and regional problem-solving, drawing inspiration from the pivotal international cooperation principles of diplomacy, dialogue, and diversity, in support of dynamic coalitions of state-based and non-state actors.

As illustrated in FIC’25, this November’s World Social Summit in Doha, and the follow-through to the recent Summit of the Future and Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, offer unique diplomatic vehicles and opportunities to promote and safeguard justice across this powerful concept’s political-judicial, socioeconomic, and environmental dimensions. Moreover, several of the diverse, justice-centric proposals detailed in this report — if embraced through vigorous dialogue, adopted formally by UN Member States, and skillfully taken forward — are poised to prepare global and regional organizations to better deliver on the World Social Summit’s closely related action agenda for tackling the structural causes of the profound social challenges afflicting many societies today, including abject poverty, high unemployment (especially among the younger generation), and social exclusion.

While the apex of the multilateral system, the United Nations, will begin its ninth decade on October 24, 2025, global order appears fragile and in flux against the backdrop of today’s devastating wars, runaway climate change, Great Power competition, unconstrained artificial intelligence, and other factors fueling long-standing inequality and injustice. Whether the world body’s 193 Member States can navigate the difficult challenges ahead and avoid a breakdown or, more hopefully, achieve a breakthrough depends on a combination of factors. To be sure, enlightened global leadership with the full confidence and substantive contributions of their citizens is essential to progress. Equally important is an unequivocal and irreversible vision for global justice and a concomitant commitment to its core principles, including fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion.

# Annex: List of Relevant Resources

## Reports and Books:

- ▶ [Confronting the Crisis of Global Governance](#) (June 2015)
- ▶ [Just Security in an Undergoverned World](#) (Oxford University Press, 2018)
- ▶ [An Innovation Agenda for UN75: The Albright-Gambari Commission Report and the Road to 2020](#) (June 2019)
- ▶ [Reimagining Governance in a Multipolar World](#) (co-published by the Doha Forum and Stimson Center, September 2019)
- ▶ [UN 2.0: Ten Innovations for Global Governance – 75 Years beyond San Francisco](#) (June 2020)
- ▶ [Coping with New and Old Crises: Global and Regional Cooperation in an Age of Epidemic Uncertainty](#) (co-published by the Doha Forum and Stimson Center, December 2020)
- ▶ [Fulfilling the UN75 Declaration's Promise: An Expert Series' Synthesis of Major Insights and Recommendations](#) (June 2021)
- ▶ [Beyond UN75: A Roadmap for Inclusive, Networked & Effective Global Governance](#) (June 2021)
- ▶ [Building Back Together and Greener: Twenty Initiatives for a Just, Healthy and Sustainable Global Recovery](#) (co-published by the Doha Forum and Stimson Center, September 2021)
- ▶ [Road to 2023: Our Common Agenda and the Pact for the Future](#) (June 2022)
- ▶ [Rethinking Global Cooperation: Three New Frameworks for Collective Action in an Age of Uncertainty](#) (co-published by the Doha Forum and Stimson Center, September 2022)
- ▶ [Global Governance Survey 2023: Finding Consensus in a Divided World](#) (June 2023)
- ▶ [Global Governance Innovation Report 2023: Redefining Approaches to Peace, Security & Humanitarian Action](#) (June 2023)
- ▶ [Future of International Cooperation Report 2023 – Building Shared Futures: Innovating Governance for Global and Regional Problem Solving](#) (co-published with Doha Forum and the Global Institute for Strategic Research, September 2023)
- ▶ [2023 Report of the Climate Governance Commission: Governing Our Planetary Emergency](#) (Climate Governance Commission, November 2023)
- ▶ [Global Governance Innovation Report 2024: Advancing Human Security through a New Global Economic Governance Architecture](#) (June 2024)
- ▶ [Future of International Cooperation Report 2024 – The Innovation Imperative: Tech-Governance, Development & Security at a Crossroads](#) (September 2024)
- ▶ [Global Governance Innovation Report 2025: Advancing the Pact for the Future and Environmental Governance](#) (June 2025)

## Latest Action Plans from the Global Policy Dialogues Series:

- ▶ [Roadmap for the Future We Want & UN We Need: A Vision 2020 for UN75 & Beyond](#) (UN75 Global Governance Forum, September 2020)
- ▶ [Global Policy Dialogue on the Triple Planetary Crisis](#) (Recife, Brazil: Plataforma CIPÓ, January 2023)
- ▶ [Global Policy Dialogue on the Africa we Want and the UN we Need](#) (Abuja, Nigeria: Savannah Center for Diplomacy, Democracy and Development, February 2024)
- ▶ [Global Policy Dialogue on Advancing Human Security through a New Global Economic Governance Architecture](#) (Tokyo, Japan, as part of the 2024 ACUNS Annual Meeting)
- ▶ [Global Policy Dialogue on the Triple Planetary Crisis and Future of Environmental Governance at the ACUNS Annual Meeting](#) (Nairobi, Kenya, June 2025)

## Global Governance Innovation Network Latest Policy Briefs:

- ▶ [Responsibility Chains—Building Global Governance for Forest Risk Commodity Chains](#) (August 2022)
- ▶ [Bolstering Arms Control in a Contested Geopolitical Environment](#) (November 2022)
- ▶ [Enhancing Preventative Measure for Money Laundering and Corruption](#) (April 2024)
- ▶ [The Our Common Agenda as Inspiration for International Organizations](#) (April 2024)
- ▶ [Revising the United Nations Charter](#) (April 2024)
- ▶ [From Commitments to Results: Strengthening the G20's Role in Promoting Global Climate Action](#) (July 2024)
- ▶ [Biennial UN-G20+ Summit: Bridging the Global Economy Governance Gap](#) (August 2024)
- ▶ [Complex Global Shocks, Emergency Platforms, and United Nations Reform](#) (September 2024)
- ▶ [Governing AI for the Future of Humanity: Connecting the Declaration on Future Generations with the Global Digital Compact](#) (March 2025)
- ▶ [Options for Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms in Global Environmental Governance](#) (June 2025)

# Endnotes

## Executive Summary

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## I. Introduction: Justice Unpacked, Trends, and Concepts

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# Future of International Cooperation Report 2025

## Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress

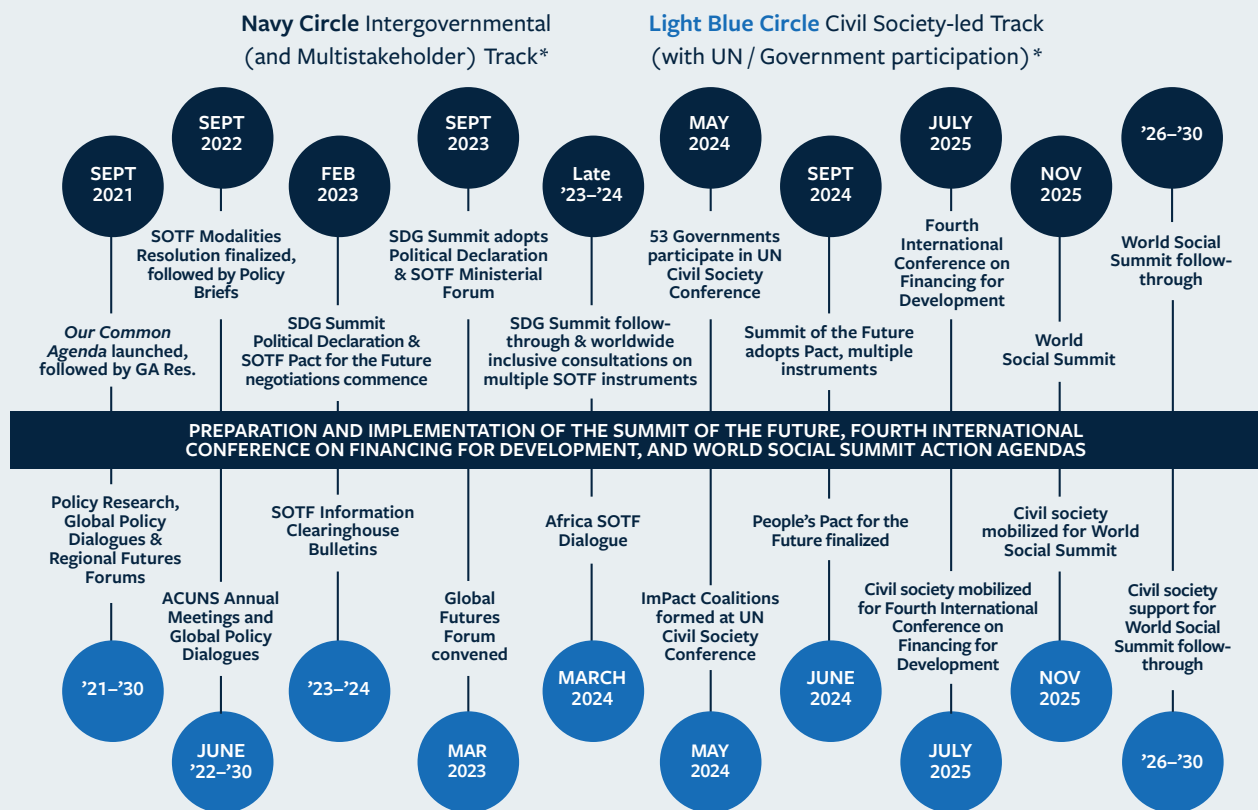
*“...both the forum and this report’s focus on ‘diplomacy, dialogue, and diversity’ matter...to achieve genuine progress in the hard-fought struggle against injustice.”*

—Foreword to FIC’25

Mubarak Al-Kuwari, Brian Finlay, and Mohamed Chihi

Without bold and decisive action, acute injustices within and between countries risk undermining global stability and collective progress. This third edition of the *Future of International Cooperation Report* (FIC’25) focuses on how institutions and the practice of governance — operating at global and regional levels — can contribute to more just societies by protecting human rights, fostering inclusion, and leveraging innovation to bridge long-standing divisions. With a fresh analytical lens, and presenting foundational principles for effective global and regional governance, the report assesses the major challenges, threats, and opportunities for “justice in action” to be found in reforming political-judicial institutions, filling socioeconomic justice gaps, and advancing environmental justice. This November’s World Social Summit in Doha, and the follow-through to the 2024 Summit of the Future in New York and the recent Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Sevilla, offer unique roadmaps for government and non-governmental leaders committed to tackling the structural causes of injustice, including political and social exclusion, judicial corruption, extreme inequality, abject poverty, violence and insecurity, and an uninhabitable environment.

**Figure 4.1: Summit of the Future and Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development Follow-through & Roadmap to the World Social Summit and Beyond**



\* Only select recommended activities listed. Source: Original Figure, Stimson Center.

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