

Why we need an international body to manage the world's dwindling natural resources

CLUB OF ROME 14-08-2025 Lewis Akenji and Janez Potočnik

If we want the global economy to stay stable, competitive and sustainable, we need to urgently rethink how we manage the world's natural resources.

In the last decades we have built highly extractive and inefficient systems, with the sectors that provide our most essential services — food, housing, mobility and energy — the most resource-intensive and environmentally damaging.

The extraction and processing of materials drives around 60% of global greenhouse gas emissions, over 90% of land-related biodiversity loss and water stress and 40% of particulate matter pollution.

It is also profoundly unfair, with rich countries using six times more materials per capita than low-income countries, according to the [International Resources Panel](#) (IRP).

As natural resource stocks dwindle amid the growing demand for critical minerals, we're already seeing the consequences in conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, potential land grabs in Greenland and Ukraine and rising tensions in the South China Sea.

In Canada, [Prime Minister Mark Carney put his finger](#) on the motivation behind President Donald Trump's call for its northern neighbour to become the fifty-first state. "The Americans want our resources, our water, our land, our country," he said.

Despite its fundamental importance, international governance of resource use has been overlooked or avoided for decades. While governments have recently begun developing resource efficiency and circular economy strategies, most still focus on downstream issues like recycling.

What we need, instead, is an international framework to oversee how resources are extracted, traded and used. This framework should be built on principles of equity, transparency and long-term resilience, with a proposed International Materials Agency serving as the central hub for this effort.

Ideally located in a resource-rich country in the Global South, the agency would offer reliable, accessible data on material flows and their environmental impacts. It would also provide guidance on global standards and policy developments, conduct country-level risk assessments for critical supply chains and support both governments and businesses in aligning their resource use with climate and development goals.

To ensure fair access — especially for low-income countries — we also need mechanisms that guarantee that developing nations can obtain the materials they need to decarbonise and grow. One approach could be the establishment of resource trusts, which would help prevent deepening global inequality and rising instability.

Another key area is measurement. Traditional metrics like GDP or recycling rates don't tell the full story. Instead, governments should be able to track how systems of provisioning for key sectors like food, housing, transport and energy contribute to wellbeing while staying within planetary boundaries. They could then be able to prioritise spending on those that are most efficient.

Existing indicators are flawed but they offer a starting point on which to further develop or find better alternatives. Germany, for instance, has set a target to reduce material footprints to 6–8 tonnes per capita by 2045 as part of its [Circular Economy Strategy](#).

The EU's upcoming 2026 Circular Economy Act could go further by establishing legally binding material targets and embedding these across food, housing, mobility and energy systems.

By using its influence to champion a transparent and justice-based framework for international resource governance, the EU could deliver on its existing climate and nature commitments, whilst increasing fairness and European competitiveness.

The IPCC has given us a clear climate target of 1.5C. It's time we had a similar benchmark for resource use, one that aligns economic activity with ecological limits and human wellbeing.

If we don't act, the scramble for dwindling resources will only intensify, and ordinary people will pay an ever-increasing price.

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