HAMBURG
SUSTAINABILITY
CONFERENCE

No Time for Lamentation:

A New Agenda for Cooperation.

Chair's Summary of the
Hamburg Sustainability Conference 2026

›I am done with lamentations. In every lamentation, there are also tremendous opportunities.‹

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO)

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Executive Summary

The Hamburg Sustainability Conference (HSC) 2026 convened around 1,600 participants from 112 countries at a moment of profound disruption and redistribution of power. The HSC confirmed sustainability as the organizing framework linking peace and stability, economic resilience and competitiveness, planetary boundaries and international cooperation. The rules-based international order is under pressure, fiscal space is shrinking and conflicts are multiplying, while climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion are compounding these pressures on economies and societies already stretched thin. Yet the world has never possessed greater technological capabilities, financial wealth and scientific knowledge. What matters now is how we use these resources to deliver shared prosperity and resilience.

The discussions at HSC 2026 can be summarized along three narrative arcs. The first asks **why** cooperation remains essential in a more multipolar world. Legitimacy depends on changing the terms of North–South relations, broadening representation and building a cooperative multipolar order in which a wider group of actors can shape and defend common rules. The launch of the South–North Commission on Development offers a structured process for rethinking international cooperation toward fairer partnerships and a sustainability Agenda beyond 2030.

The second narrative arc examines **what** needs to change. Sustainability transformation pays off economically, but only where investment can flow, risks are shared and governance is predictable. Nature and human capital are systematically undervalued. The bottleneck is the institutional and financing structures needed to unlock them at scale.

The third narrative arc addresses **how** cooperation can deliver. It shows that partnerships accelerate sustainable development when they move from one-off initiatives to systems that mobilize finance, create markets and build local capabilities. Scaling Capital for Sustainable Development (SCALED), Innovative Capital Mobilization in Africa (ICAMA), critical-mineral and hydrogen partnerships, and urban examples from Mombasa and eThekwini show how tangible forms of cooperation can turn commitments into sustainable investment, deeper value chains and locally owned action. This shift is especially visible in Africa, where partnerships are increasingly framed around opportunity, value creation and agency.

The road ahead runs through the Triple COP+ year, the G20 under UK chairmanship, and the SDG Summit in September 2027. HSC 2026 demonstrated that navigating the new—disruptive—normal is possible. The task now is to prove it at scale.

Networking and exchange at HSC 2026

HSC 2026 gathered global leaders—including 1 Head of State, 3 Deputy Heads of State or Government, 17 Ministers and 12 Heads of International Organizations.

Sustainability in the Age of Disorder

Introduction

Under the motto "The Power of Cooperation: Driving Progress Together," the Hamburg Sustainability Conference 2026 took place at a moment of profound geopolitical, economic and institutional disruption. Rather than dwelling on the disruption, this Summary advances a central message: sustainability is not a policy field among others, but the organizing framework linking peace and stability, economic resilience and competitiveness, and international cooperation amid mounting pressures on planetary boundaries. Solutions, political will and private sector capacity already exist, yet remain fragmented and underused. What matters is who can access natural, financial and technological resources, who captures their value and whether they contribute to shared prosperity, resilience and agency.

Discussions at the HSC underscored that multilateral cooperation remains indispensable, even as the existing international order comes under severe pressure. As the HSC Curtain Raiser[1] emphasized, issue-specific, plurilateral and cross-regional arrangements increasingly complement traditional cooperation mechanisms. These arrangements can generate progress when universal consensus is difficult to achieve. Their wider contribution will depend on their openness, coherence and capacity to reinforce the multilateral system.

At the conference, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was described as a "declaration of interdependence." The HSC was a place to start discussions on the future of the current Agenda beyond 2030. Reopening the entire framework would place one of the remaining areas of broad international agreement at risk. Greater attention should instead be directed toward leveling up financing, accountability and institutional capacity, enabling the existing goals and principles to generate tangible progress in changing national and local contexts.

HSC 2026 offered a practical response to the widening gap between international ambition and delivery. More than 15 alliances and initiatives were created or substantially deepened.[2] The strongest tension running through the conference was between urgency and legitimacy. Action needs to accelerate, while durable solutions depend on inclusive governance, local ownership and a fair distribution of risks and benefits. Approaches that reproduce extraction, exclusion or decision-making concentrated among a limited group of actors will struggle to generate trust and lasting impact.

Three narrative arcs provide an organizing structure for this Summary: **1: Why** cooperation remains essential in a multipolar world; **2: What** needs to change for sustainability transformation to become a source of competitiveness and resilience rather than a constraint; and **3: How** partnerships can accelerate the shift from commitments to implementation. Together, these arcs show how the valuation, governance and distribution of nature, finance, technology and knowledge will shape sustainable development toward 2030 and beyond.

1 UNDP (2026). *A Brave New World: Building Alliances that Deliver on Sustainable Development*. Hamburg: Hamburg Sustainability Conference (HSC).

2 Hamburg Sustainability Conference (HSC) (2026). *HSC 2026 endet mit neuen Impulsen und Allianzen für eine nachhaltige globale Zukunft* [Press release].

Narrative Arc 1: Why?

Renewed Cooperation Matters

Trust and Legitimacy in a Multipolar World

Voices from the Room

›Confidence in multilateralism is taking a hit, but the trust is still there. […] We need to reinvent institutions for the 21st century—not tinker with them, but transform them.‹

Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General and Chair of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group

Amina J. Mohammed, United Nations; in conversation with **Achim Steiner**, Chair of the Hamburg Sustainability Conference; **Reem Alabali Radovan**, German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ); and **Jochen Flasbarth**, German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMUKN).

The prevailing narrative frames our era as one of disruption, but the discussions at the HSC pointed to a deeper shift: with the rise of Emerging Markets and Developing Economies (EMDEs), the international order is being renegotiated via a process of redistribution of power. Yet, also global risks are being redistributed. Recognizing these underlying trends invites a conversation about structural reforms. As Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ), Reem Alabali Radovan, put it at the HSC opening, "global challenges know no borders. Our responses must not either. We need cooperation instead of confrontation, and partnerships instead of polarization." The central question raised at the HSC was therefore how a more multipolar world can move from fragmentation toward shared stewardship.

From Hegemonic Leadership to Shared Stewardship

Several speakers highlighted that multipolarity does not reduce the need for common rules. With no global hegemon in place, small and middle powers that still value international institutions now have the opportunity to assume greater responsibility as rule defenders and rule innovators. This requires a shift from an order upheld primarily by dominant powers toward cooperative multipolarity (see Figure 1).

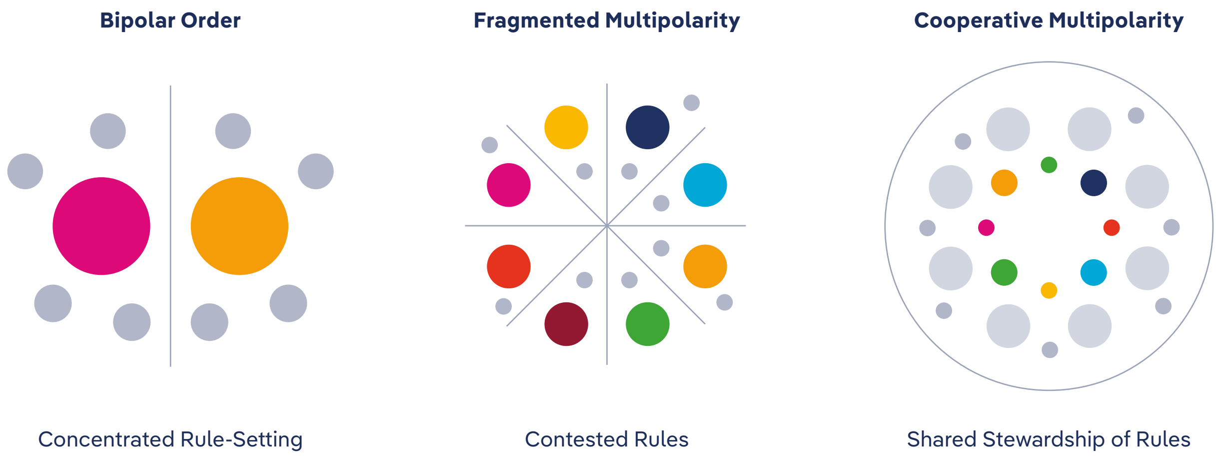


Figure 1: From Bipolar Order to Cooperative Multipolarity: The Changing Stewardship of International Rules.

Source: Authors' Adaptation Based on Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) (2025).[3]

3 Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) (2025). *The Netherlands, Europe and the Global South in a changing world order*. The Hague: AIV.

Forums, such as the United Nations, can still bring together actors that would otherwise rarely cooperate. Yet they will need to evolve rather than simply preserve inherited arrangements. The WTO reflects this dual reality, with three quarters of global trade still taking place under WTO rules.[4] The system retains a functioning core, despite persistent concerns about protectionism, outdated rules and the weakened dispute settlement system. Reform should begin by identifying what still works, while adapting institutions to geopolitical, environmental and economic change.

From Donor–Recipient Relations to Partnerships Among Equals

Legitimacy will also depend on changing the terms of cooperation between North and South. The launch of the South–North Commission reflected this demand, calling for a pragmatic, non-hierarchical model oriented toward shared interests, such as fairer finance and trade, climate action and technology sharing.

The South–North Commission on Development

Launched at HSC 2026 and co-chaired by former Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla and former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the independent South–North Commission on Development brings together around 20 high-level representatives from the 'Global South' and 'North'. Its work builds on the legacy of the North–South Commission established in 1977 under Willy Brandt. Its mandate is to strengthen international trust, overcome polarization and develop proposals for fairer, more effective and more sustainable global partnerships. Its work will combine joint agenda-setting with regional consultations in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, and its recommendations are expected to inform international reform processes and the future direction of German development policy. The Commission is also intended to contribute to the (re-)negotiation of the Agenda beyond 2030 by generating ideas for a future framework while building on the integrated principles of the 2030 Agenda. Initial findings are expected in 2027, with a final report planned for 2028. The HSC remains an important convening space for the Commission.

4 World Trade Organization (WTO) (2026).
Global Trade Outlook and Statistics: March 2026. Geneva: WTO Publications.

Many speakers also cautioned against treating the 'Global South' as a homogeneous bloc. Low-income countries, small island states and resource-exporting countries face different constraints. A more legitimate system must therefore create space for differentiated priorities, stronger regional cooperation and greater representation without replacing one simplified binary with another. This is also relevant for the provision of global public goods that require long-term engagement and capable institutions balancing interests of governments, businesses and civil-society actors.

From Fragmented Metrics to an Integrated Agenda beyond 2030

Economic growth alone does not guarantee resilience, inclusion or political legitimacy. Several sessions highlighted the limits of GDP as a measure of progress. It does not show how benefits are distributed, whether natural capital is being depleted or whether societies are becoming more resilient to shocks. A more transformative understanding of prosperity would combine productivity and diversification, domestic value addition, social well-being and the protection of our shared natural foundations.

The debate about the period beyond 2030 provided an opportunity to connect these concerns within a new common framework. Human well-being, economic opportunity and planetary stability are deeply interconnected and cannot be pursued in isolation. This systemic logic needs to remain central beyond 2030. The discussions highlighted the need to preserve its integrated principles while adapting its narrative, institutions and implementation mechanisms to a different geopolitical context. New challenges, including AI, debt vulnerability and growing pressure on planetary boundaries, may require greater attention, while the new agenda will need to become more accessible and politically relevant, strengthening national ownership alongside the involvement of local governments and the private sector, and depending on open and self-reflective knowledge systems in which critical inquiry remains protected from political pressure and funding dependence. Where universal consensus is difficult, partnerships of willing actors can advance implementation, provided that they remain connected to common principles and the wider multilateral system.

Key Insight

Multilateral cooperation remains essential because interdependence deepens, while its legitimacy depends on who shapes the rules and who benefits from their implementation. A cooperative multipolar order will require broader representation, shared stewardship of institutions and partnerships.

Underpriced Capital

Socio-Ecological Transformation as a Competitive Advantage

Voices from the Room

›We are going to see lots of money move into natural capital because it is ancient intelligence. It is affordable, low-cost and not priced well right now. It is the next AI.‹

Valerie Hickey, Director for Environment, World Bank

Valerie Hickey, World Bank; and **Juan Carlos Jintiach Arcos**, Global Alliance of Territorial Communities; at the Solution Talk, The Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF): A Paradigm Shift in Nature Finance.

A key question discussed at the HSC was not whether sustainability transformation is desirable, but under which conditions it becomes economically viable. The underinvestment in nature and human capital creates vulnerabilities: water stress, food insecurity, supply-chain exposure, poor health outcomes and weaker resilience to shocks. All these become potential threats to security and stability. This section shows what this means in practice: from sustainably managed forests and mangroves to water systems, from industrial transformation to child nutrition. In many cases, the returns on investment are increasingly measurable and well documented.

Nature and Water Are Capital

Nature-related risks are already materializing as financial losses. Addressing them, not just acknowledging them, has become a question of competitiveness. Forests are the most affordable and available infrastructure for storing, cleaning and distributing water, which is critical to jobs, agricultural productivity and prosperity around the world. They are therefore also essential for water and food security and economic resilience. When nature degrades, costs appear elsewhere: in disrupted production, rising insurance premiums, stranded infrastructure and sovereign credit downgrades.

Water insecurity is a present-day structural risk. It reshapes finance, industry, and food systems. As Figure 2 illustrates, water stress is not evenly distributed. The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) warned in 2024 that accelerated changes in the global water cycle risk exceeding the limits of controllability, with regional water emergencies escalating into crises of planetary dimension.[5] But the financial system has not caught up with this reality. As Hamdir Ismaila of Savannah Impact Advisory argued at the HSC, it continues to direct capital toward projects that consume and degrade the freshwater resources on which economic prosperity depends, thus accelerating the crisis it should be helping to manage. Private finance will not flow into water projects without a clear business case, and that requires clear governance: who owns water, who operates it, and who is accountable.

5 German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) (2024). *Water in a heated World*. Berlin: WBGU.

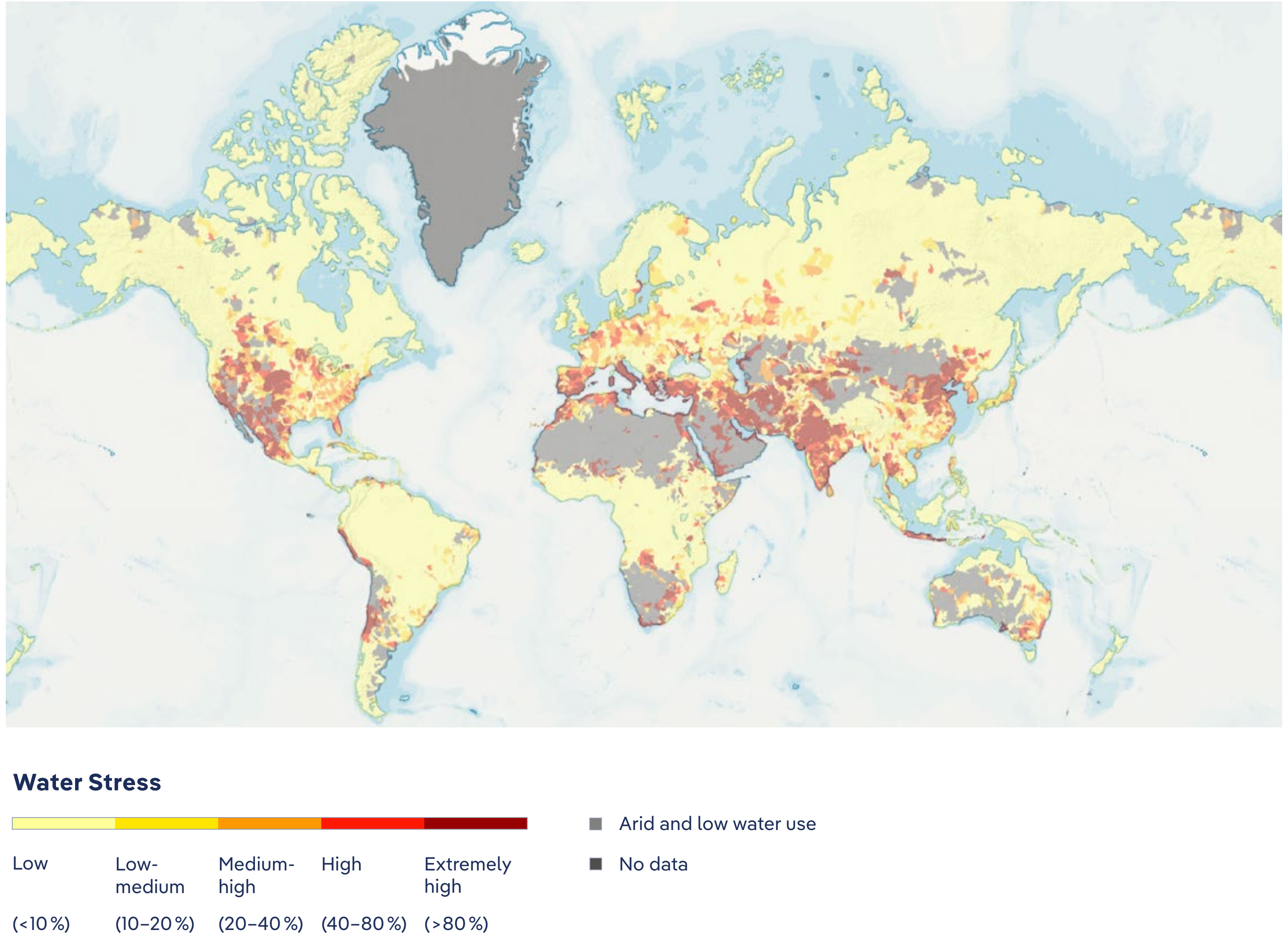


Figure 2: Water Stress as a Global Risk. Source: World Resources Institute (WRI).[6]

Isabel de Saint Malo of the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) Foundation argued at the HSC that nature-related risks must enter financial statements. The IFRS Foundation's disclosure standards—already adopted by 49 jurisdictions representing 60 % of global capital markets—provide a framework for this. But pricing alone is not enough. Once ecosystems are assigned a monetary value, they become tradable and, without the right regulations, this can mean paying to destroy nature elsewhere rather than protecting it.

One pair of jeans is washed approximately 18 times to create specific optics, yet most consumers are unaware of the water this requires. Bangladesh's fabric industry needs 1,500 billion liters of water annually to produce 5 million tons of fabric.[7]

6 World Resources Institute (WRI) (2023). *Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas* [Interactive map / tool]. Washington, DC: WRI.

7 Uddin, M.A., Begum, M.S., Ashraf, M., Azad, A.K., Adhikary, A.C., & Hossain, M.S. (2023). Water and chemical consumption in the textile processing industry of Bangladesh. *PLOS Sustainability and Transformation, 2*(7), e0000072. doi:10.1371/journal.pstr.0000072

Factories are legally required to have water treatment plants. Still, only larger companies with existing plants have access to finance; SMEs are mostly excluded. Through the Partnership for Cleaner Textiles (PAC), presented at the HSC, about 450 factories work together to reduce water use, showcasing a positive example of collective industry action.

Key Data Points from HSC 2026

– By 2030, global water demand is projected to exceed sustainable supply by 40 %.[8]

– The annual spending gap for water supply and sanitation is estimated at up to US$140.8 billion.[9]

– Only 2.5 % of the Earth's water is freshwater and most of it is not readily available for human use.[10] Large volumes of treated water are lost before reaching users: non-revenue water is estimated at around 15 % of system input in higher-income contexts, while in many utilities in low- and middle-income countries it is closer to 40–50 % of water produced.[11]

– Rainforests help produce rain. Deforestation decreases rainfall, threatening climate stability, biodiversity and carbon storage.[12]

– The growing water and energy demand of AI data centers illustrates how technological progress can create new sustainability pressures when resource use is not governed carefully.[13]

Nature-Based Solutions

Nature offers examples for circular systems that humans have barely begun to learn from. With every extinct species, we erase a blueprint for a sustainable solution, because the organism that held the answer no longer exists. In the same sense, indigenous communities hold natural cures and protecting their knowledge is essential.

8 Jaynes, C.H. (2023, March 22). *Global freshwater demand will exceed supply 40 % by 2030, experts warn*. World Economic Forum.

9 Joseph, G., Hoo, Y.R., Wang, Q., Bahuguna, A., & Andres, L.A. (2024). *Funding a Water-Secure Future: An Assessment of Global Public Spending*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.

10 U.S. Geological Survey. (2018). *Where is Earth's water?*

11 Kingdom, B., Liemberger, R., & Marin, P. (2006). *The challenge of reducing non-revenue water (NRW) in developing countries - how the private sector can help: a look at performance-based service contracting*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

12 Nobre, A.D. (2014). *The Future Climate of Amazonia: Scientific Assessment Report*. Sao Jose dos Campos – SP: ARA, CCST-INPE, & INPA.

13 Ebert, K., Alder, N., Herbrich, R., & Hacker, P. (2026). AI, climate, and regulation: From data centers to the AI Act. *Computer Law & Security Review, 61*, 106326. doi:10.1016/j.clsr.2026.106326

The Tropical Forests Forever Facility (TFFF) treats local populations as stewards, not as beneficiaries. “We are actors, we have solutions” stated Juan Carlos Jintiach Arcos, Executive Secretary of the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities. Local and indigenous communities need to be paid for their work and stewardship instead of receiving charity. Therefore, initiatives like TFFF are seen as true partnerships, offering both local ownership and visibility to private investors.

Mangroves store carbon, sustain fisheries, protect coastlines, and support ecotourism. During Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, affected communities in the Philippines indicated that areas with mangroves generally suffered less housing damage than areas without them.[14] After the Typhoon, mangroves were replanted and communities now also benefit economically from the crabs, fish and shrimp the restored ecosystems attract.

As Jochen Flasbarth, State Secretary in Germany’s Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMUKN), put it at the HSC: “Nature is not only nice to have, it is also necessary for our economies.” The challenge is scale. Globally, 14 million hectares of mangroves exist today, yet 50% of them are at risk of collapse by 2050. If lost, 1.8 billion tons of carbon storage disappear—equivalent to 17% of the total current carbon stored in mangroves—with a social cost of carbon release valued at US$336 billion.[15]

The private sector has already started to invest in nature-based protection. At the HSC, Alexander Schmidt, Chief Underwriting Officer at Zurich Insurance, noted that the company co-supports a mangrove park project in the Philippines, together with Team Malizia and the Mama Earth Foundation. A key lesson from their experience: public funding plays a critical role not just as capital, but as a quality signal, ensuring that projects are genuinely sustainable and locally anchored.

Climate Transformation as Industrial Policy

Discussions at the HSC made clear that the sustainability transition is about managing financial and economic security risks that are already affecting company valuations, credit ratings, and supply chains. Critical minerals brought this argument into sharp relief: the economies that hold the minerals needed for batteries or solar panels are rarely those that process them and capture their value.

14 Delfino, R.J.P., Carlos, C.M., David, L.T., Lasco, R.D., & Juanico, D.E.O. (2016). Perceptions of Typhoon Haiyan affected communities about the resilience and storm protection function of mangrove ecosystems in Leyte and Eastern Samar, Philippines. *Climate, Disaster and Development Journal, 1*(1), 14–23. doi:10.18783/cddj.v001.i01.a03

15 International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) (2024). *More than half of all mangrove ecosystems at risk of collapse by 2050, first global assessment finds* [Press release].

This is not just a development challenge; it is an issue of economic security since supply chains for critical minerals remain highly concentrated. Diversifying processing capacity thus helps to decrease strategic vulnerabilities of all sides.

Europe’s unique selling point lies in its standards on environmental compliance, human rights in supply chains and transparent governance of mineral revenues. Bärbel Kofler, Parliamentary State Secretary at Germany’s Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), pointed out that transparency is the currency of transaction in this space. Without transparency, neither trust nor investment flows. The competitive advantage of standards, however, only holds if Europe can act before markets are already taken. As Sabine Dall’Omo, Chief Executive Officer at Siemens Sub-Saharan Africa, noted at the HSC: “Where are you?” is the question African partners increasingly ask European companies.

Child Nutrition as Investment

What holds true for forests and mangroves holds true for people as well: prevention remains underinvested. Malnutrition costs the global economy up to US$4.1 trillion per year,[16] which is nearly Germany’s entire GDP, while every dollar invested in food fortification generates around US$27 in economic benefit.[17] At HSC 2026, BMZ, UNICEF, the World Food Programme and more than 30 partners launched a call to action for large-scale food fortification to end child malnutrition by 2030.

Key Insight

Nature must be seen as a whole. Forests, fresh water systems, oceans and coasts are interconnected systems whose degradation generates cascading crises and systemic risks across economies, food systems and communities. The same logic applies to human potential: a malnourished child, a community without clean water, a farmer without access to insurance are not separate development problems. They are symptoms of underinvestment in the capital that sustains economies and societies. Seeing the interdependencies and measuring the components of such systems are both necessary for informed investment and decision making.

16 World Bank (2024). *Investment Framework for Nutrition 2024. Human development perspectives overview booklet*. © World Bank.

17 World Food Programme (WFP). (2026). *Food Fortification*. Rome: WFP.

Narrative Arc 3: How?

From Words to Action

New Partnership Models

Voices from the Room

›Africa is rapidly urbanizing and many new buildings and infrastructure will be built. This creates immense opportunities for decarbonization, but delivering net zero requires a strong working relationship between cities and private industries.‹

Francis Thoya, Deputy Governor, County Government of Mombasa, Kenya

Francis Thoya, County Government of Mombasa, Kenya; **Diana Pretzell**, City of Mannheim, Germany; **Céline Carré**, Saint-Gobain; and moderator **Xana Maunze**, HSC Youth Ambassador; at the Solution Talk "Forging City-Industry Alliances for Climate Neutrality Markets."

HSC 2026 pointed to a broader shift in international cooperation: not primarily despite geopolitical divergence, but through the convergence of national self-interest, economic opportunity and shared global interests. Discussions on critical minerals, resilient supply chains, cities and investment all show that countries and businesses do not need to agree on everything in order to recognize converging interests and act on them. The HSC framed partnerships as practical delivery mechanisms for this convergence: ways to mobilize finance, create markets, share risks and build local capacities around common sustainability goals. The needed shift from one-off initiatives to implementation systems was especially visible in discussions around Africa's transformations, where the narrative has moved beyond extraction and aid, and toward partnership models.

Africa as a Place of Opportunity

Several sessions framed the continent through its young population, digital entrepreneurship and growing consumer markets. Africa's private capital ecosystem does not lack ambition nor innovation. What is missing are stronger market-enabling structures and investment vehicles that respond to real market barriers. International partners can help share risk, support market infrastructure and connect external finance with domestic capital, but the center of gravity must shift toward African firms, pension funds and regional financial institutions.

New Partnerships for Sustainable Investment

SCALED presented a major milestone for mobilizing private investment for sustainable development. The initiative announced the planned creation of SCALED Development. Germany and Canada participate as public partners, while Allianz, La Caisse and Zurich Insurance Group participate as private-sector partners. The platform will develop standardized financial products to mobilize sustainable investment in the Global South.

ICAMA presented first implementation successes in mobilizing innovative capital for African start-ups and SMEs. In Ghana, US$35 million is already available for such investments. At HSC 2026, GIZ and the Savannah Institute for Innovative Finance signed a grant agreement marking ICAMA's contribution to the Technical Assistance Facility of the Ci-Gaba VC Ltd. Fund-of-Funds in Ghana.

A further milestone was the MoU between GIZ, FSD Africa and FSD Africa Investments. It aims to strengthen collaboration on innovative investment vehicles, private-capital mobilization and financial-market development in Africa, while advancing financial inclusion and job creation.

However, as Mo Ibrahim put it at the HSC opening, "the cost of capital in Africa is too high," referring to the "Africa premium" that makes even promising projects significantly more expensive to finance, with African borrowers often paying interest rates two to three times higher than wealthier countries. Rating agencies and macroprudential frameworks often reinforce these risk perceptions. Several interventions therefore called for a shift from pricing risk to recognizing African markets as an investment opportunity. Moreover, several sessions explicitly discussed that cooperation with African economies must move beyond extractive models and build on partnerships that support local processing, logistics and skills, while providing transparent governance and accountability.

Green hydrogen examples from Namibia, India and Brazil also illustrated a central challenge: production potential alone is not enough. Demand stimulation, regulation and finance are required to create viable low-carbon markets, whether for green ammonia, e-fuels or green steel. Therefore, low-carbon partnerships must also be industrial partnerships: they can reduce dependency on volatile fossil-fuel markets while creating local value, market development and supply-chain capacities.

Cities as Delivery Arenas for Industrial and Capacity Development

As multilateral cooperation faces growing limits, cities are gaining importance as agents of change and resilience. Africa's rapid urbanization illustrates another concrete example of partnership potential. Large volumes of housing, buildings and urban infrastructure will be built in the coming decades, creating a window to shape lower-carbon development before high-emission systems become locked in (see Figure 3). Cities are thus markets, regulators and infrastructure providers. They can aggregate demand, connect firms with public priorities and make sustainability visible in people's everyday lives.

Mombasa was a highlighted example. Kenya's National Building and Construction Decarbonization Roadmap sets the overall direction, but counties like Mombasa must translate it into planning, building standards, enforcement and compliance. This transition is still at an early stage: financing remains a major gap, incentives for green buildings are limited and awareness among developers needs to grow. However, this is also an opportunity for city-industry partnerships, especially in the mobility sector, based on a systems approach that includes public transport and active mobility, charging infrastructure and reliable electricity, industrialization and employment creation. Cities create frameworks and demand, while private industries can provide the resources and implementation capacity needed to make net-zero development possible.

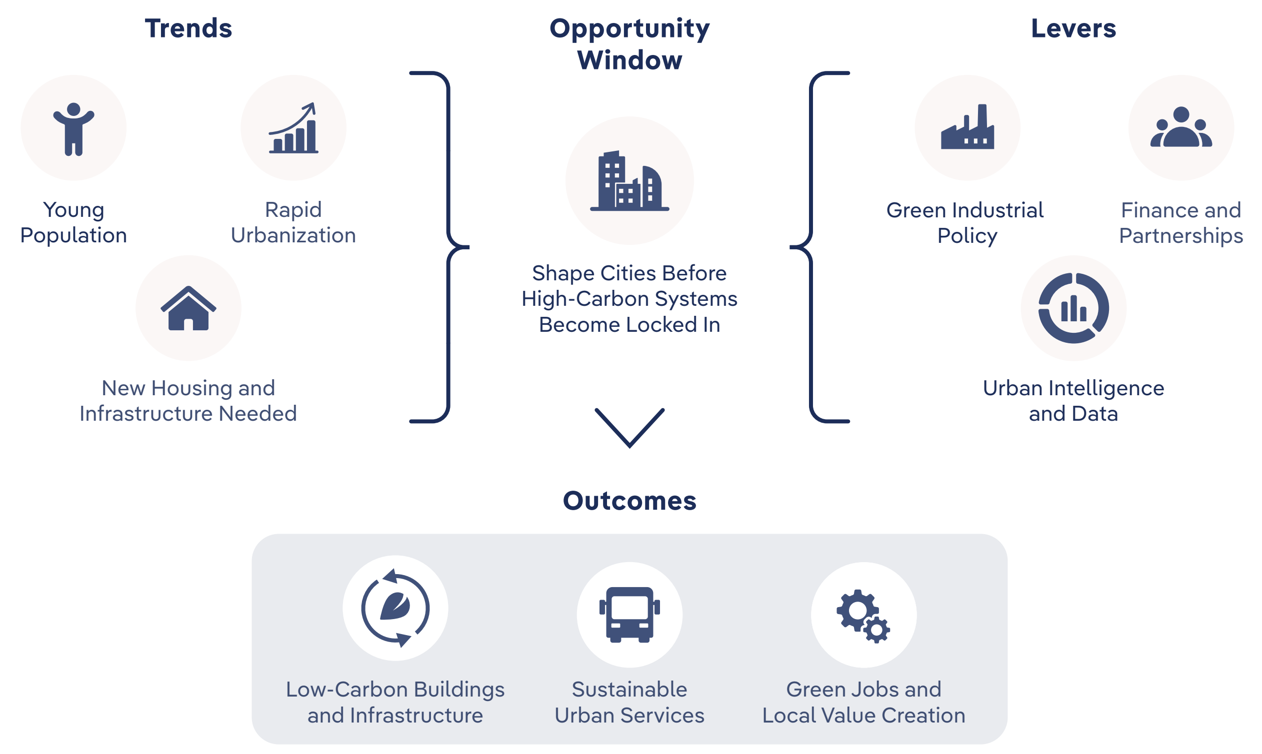


Figure 3: African Urbanization as an Opportunity for Low-Carbon and Inclusive Urban Development. Source: Authors.

Urban transformation also depends on data, digital tools and the capacities to use them. In Namibia, Ukraine and Somalia, satellite data, remote sensing and digital applications were discussed as tools for informal-settlement upgrading, reconstruction and water management. This makes accountable and reliable data governance part of urban capacity development. The Hamburg–eThekwini AI partnership supported the use of AI in Voluntary Local Reviews, while the Water Operators' Partnership with Hamburg Wasser contributed to reduced water losses, GIS mapping and real-time flow and pressure monitoring. This partnership story shows that data and peer learning become useful when they are linked to institutions, local knowledge and decision-making.

Key Insight

Partnerships accelerate sustainable development when they move beyond one-off projects and become delivery systems: mobilizing finance, building local capabilities and creating markets. This shift is most clear in Africa, where cooperation is increasingly framed around opportunity, value creation and agency. Urban partnerships show how this logic becomes tangible on the ground: cities can connect public priorities with private investment, technical expertise and everyday service delivery.

Outlook

What Comes Next

Strategic Insights and the Road to 2027

Voices from the Room

›Who gets to define sustainability? All of us!‹

Xana Maunze, HSC Youth Ambassador, Climate Finance Expert

Xana Maunze, HSC Youth Ambassador, at the closing session “HSC—Bridging the Gap from Dialogue to Implementation.”

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala’s opening challenge, to move beyond lamentation toward opportunity, captures what the HSC ultimately demonstrated. A new basis for cooperative multipolarity is emerging through partnerships around national self-interest, economic opportunity and shared global stewardship. Sustainable development is not a sectoral, national or governance-scale-specific agenda; it is the common framework through which resilience, legitimacy and competitiveness can be built.

HSC 2026 did not end with a single answer to the world’s sustainability challenges. Sustainability carries different meanings, urgencies and starting points for different people, communities and countries. That is not a problem to be resolved before cooperation can begin, but the reality that cooperation must reflect.

Auma Obama’s words, repeated in the closing, stayed with the room: “My difference is my power.” It is a principle that applies beyond the individual. The diversity of perspectives brought to Hamburg—from coastal mayors to steel manufacturers, from indigenous forest community leaders to African pension fund managers—is not an obstacle to shared action, it is its foundation.

Across the three narrative arcs, one pattern emerged clearly: sustainability is no longer only an environmental or development agenda. It is increasingly about resilience, security and opportunity in an interdependent world. Cooperation cannot deliver without renewed legitimacy. Climate transformations pay off where investment can flow and where risks are shared, but nature, water and human capital remain systematically underpriced and underinvested. Partnerships show what delivery can look like when finance, local ownership and institutional capacity align. As the challenges are connected, so must be the solutions, across scales, sectors and regions.

HSC 2026 offered three principal lessons. First, legitimacy cannot be assumed, it must be built through inclusion, representation and partnerships that deliver tangible benefits, as the South–North Commission on Development attempts to do. Second, solutions to climate, nature, water and human capital challenges exist and their returns are proven, but they remain systematically underpriced and underinvested. Third, partnerships scale when they create shared value, reduce risks and build local capacities: SCALED, ICAMA, mangrove, hydrogen and critical minerals alliances, urban initiatives and water compacts show what delivery looks like when structures align. The discussions on Africa made this especially visible. They challenged deficit-focused narratives and framed the continent not primarily as a site of risk or need, but as a space of opportunity, investment, innovation and agency.

HSC 2026 also highlighted that, as 2030 approaches, spaces are needed where the conversation about a follow-up framework to the SDGs can begin before formal negotiations take shape. The Beyond 2030 accelerator session at this year’s HSC was one such space. Its value was not in producing conclusions, but in building trust and shared understanding on which formal processes can eventually build.

The Road to 2027

The road ahead is defined by a sequence of opportunities, each connected to what this year's HSC helped to promote. The second half of 2026 alone brings three major multilateral environmental conferences in rapid succession—UNCCD COP17 in Mongolia in August, CBD COP17 in Armenia in October, and UNFCCC COP31 in Turkey in November—followed immediately by the UN Water Conference in the UAE in December. This Triple COP+ year is not a coincidence to be managed, but an opportunity to be seized.

The Belém Joint Statement from COP30 already called for it: parties should plan together across conventions rather than separately, fund integrated action instead of siloed programs, and monitor progress across agreements simultaneously. Panama's "Nature Pledge" showed that unified reporting across three separate convention commitments is technically feasible, though it requires political will, not just institutional invention. The same logic that ran through HSC 2026—we cannot separate industries, forests and water—applies directly to the institutions meant to govern them.

The UK's G20 Presidency in 2027 and the SDG Summit in 2027 are the next critical staging points for the beyond 2030 discussion that will need to intensify at the HSC 2027. The window is narrow, and therefore the preparations need to begin now.

Nick Anstett, FinDev Canada; **Martin Ewald**, SCALED; **Christiane Laibach**, KfW; **Niels Annen**, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany; **Patricia Victoria Peña**, Global Affairs Canada; **Peter Maurer**, Zurich Insurance; and **Udo Riese**, Allianz Investment Management; at the New Alliance Talk "SCALED: A New Era of Sustainable Investing."

Vera Songwe, Liquidity and Sustainability Facility; **Christian Klein**, SAP; **Gilbert F. Houngbo**, International Labour Organization; **Reem Alabali Radovan**, German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ); **Paschal Donohoe**, World Bank; and **Ingrid-Gabriela Hoven**, GIZ; at the Signing of the Joint Communiqué on Closing the Global Skills Gap.

Timeline: Key Opportunities to Build on HSC 2026 Outcomes

July 2026	**HLPF 2026** *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2026* New York, United States
August 17–28, 2026	**UNCCD COP17** *United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
October 19–30, 2026	**CBD COP17** *Convention on Biological Diversity* Yerevan, Armenia
November 9–20, 2026	**UNFCCC COP31** *United Nations Climate Change Conference* Antalya, Türkiye
December 8–10, 2026	**United Nations Water Conference** Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
December 14–15, 2026	**G20 Leaders' Summit** *Group of Twenty Leaders' Summit* Miami, United States
2027	**UK-Hosted G20 Process** *Several Working Groups, Ministerial and Leaders Meetings* United Kingdom, Date and Location TBA
Mid-2027	**HSC 2027** Hamburg, Germany
September 2027	**SDG Summit 2027** *Sustainable Development Goals Summit* New York, United States

HSC 2026 underscored that fragmentation need not mean paralysis. Sustainability provides an organizing framework through which resilience, competitiveness and security increasingly intersect; enlightened national self-interest can therefore become a basis for renewed cooperation rather than its antithesis. The task is to identify those convergences and build institutions and partnerships capable of acting on them.

We're Shaping the Future. Together.

The Hamburg Sustainability Week brought sustainability into neighborhoods across the city, bringing together residents, community organizations and local changemakers to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals. The expanded 2026 program featured nearly 250 events across 35 neighborhoods, with 150 partner institutions and more than 10,000 visitors. From open dialogues to immersive art and hands-on activities, the Week created space to learn, exchange ideas and shape Hamburg's future.

Rathausmarkt Future Garden offered a shared space where sustainability became tangible and participatory. More than 8,000 visitors engaged with workshops, outdoor activities, screenings and information sessions. Activities ranged from exploring seeds with the Hamburger Klimaschutzstiftung to repairing outdoor gear with Globetrotter, while the Cube streamed HSC sessions and films and the Dome hosted panels on sustainable development, equality of opportunity and circular transformation.

HAMBURG SUSTAINABILITY WEEK

From Global Dialogue to Local Action

Bringing Sustainability into Public Life

Beyond the conference rooms, the Hamburg Sustainability Week and Rathausmarkt Future Garden created spaces for dialogue, participation and practical engagement across the city. They connected themes discussed at HSC with local communities, organizations and changemakers, offering opportunities to explore sustainability through workshops, art, screenings, open conversations and hands-on activities. Together, the Week and Future Garden showed how global challenges can be translated into accessible experiences and local action—extending the conversation around sustainability into everyday life and making it part of the city's public life.

›For Hamburg, the 17 Goals are not just abstract ambitions but a daily responsibility that guides our actions.‹

Katharina Fegebank, Senator and Second Mayor, Ministry for the Environment, Climate, Energy and Agriculture, Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg

Discover the 2026 program, explore the events and initiatives across the city and find out more about the Hamburg Sustainability Week and Rathausmarkt Future Garden.

A Meeting Point for Global and Local Perspectives

Conference participants, local residents, sustainability advocates and more than 50 partner organizations joined the conversation. Guests and panelists included Nils Annen, Juliana Rotich, Auma Obama, Ilya Espino de Marotta, Sonja Stuchtey, Katja Kirchstein and Metin Hakverdi. By bringing international voices into a public setting alongside local initiatives, the Future Garden bridged global sustainability debates with the experiences and ideas of people in Hamburg.

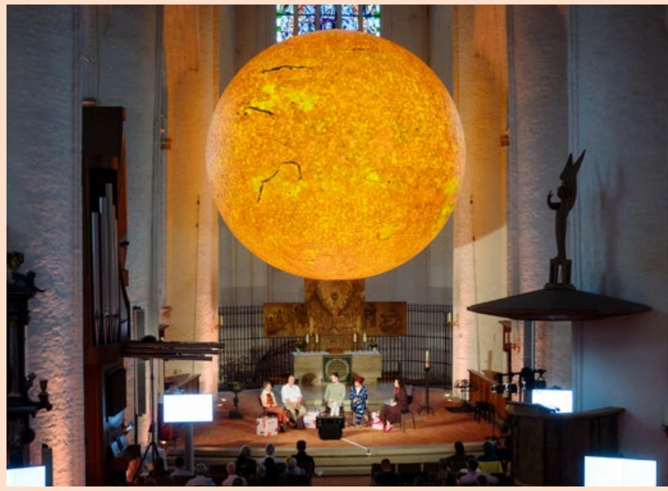
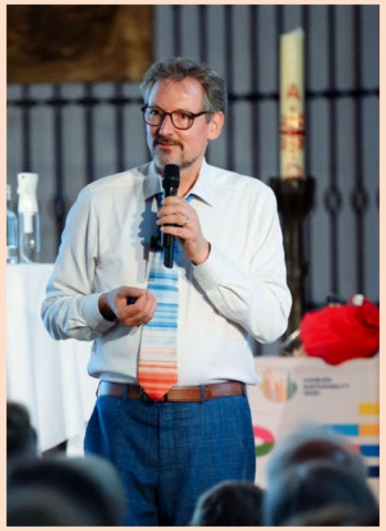
A Citywide Network for Transformation

Strong partnerships helped the Hamburg Sustainability Week reach diverse audiences, with contributions from figures including Luisa Neubauer, Eckart von Hirschhausen, Alexander De Croo, Michael Otto and Achim Steiner. Across the city, these collaborations helped turn sustainability from discussion into participation and action.







Photos: Impressions from the Hamburg Sustainability Week, captured across the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, featuring more than 250 events across 35 neighborhoods and involving 150 partner institutions.

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HAMBURG
SUSTAINABILITY
CONFERENCE

Summary Report by Achim Steiner, Chair of the Hamburg Sustainability Conference.

In cooperation with Axel Berger, Franco Jauregui-Fung and Lena-Marie Putz,
German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

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