Keeping the Environment on the Agenda: UNEP Discourse During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

When a global crisis hits, competition between policy domains heightens as priorities switch. International organizations (IOs) whose mandates are not directly concerned struggle to maintain attention to the issue they promote. Such was the case for IOs involved in global environmental governance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article examines discourse as one specific means used by IOs reacting to crises. It conceptualizes three discursive practices IOs perform when crises reshape priorities: *meaning-making*, *relevance-claiming*, and *action-timing*. Empirically, the article investigates how the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) responded to the pandemic. Analyzing a comprehensive corpus of 251 statements from UNEP's Executive Director Inger Andersen (2020–2023), it shows how UNEP connected environmental and health crises, asserted institutional relevance, and sought to maintain momentum on long-term goals to keep environmental issues on the agenda during the pandemic. The findings contribute to research on IOs and crises, highlighting discourse as a strategic resource for agenda-keeping.

Keywords: Agenda-keeping, crisis, discourse, health–environment nexus, international organizations, UNEP

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a challenge for international organizations (IOs), not only requiring them to adapt their professional practices to lockdowns and sanitary measures but also shifting the focus of global policies and international debates toward the health crisis. Other issues like environmental protection and climate change partially lost political attention, and important decisions were delayed. Reflecting on the postponed biodiversity negotiations, the Executive Director (ED) of UNEP noted, "it is a terrible irony that COVID-19 has delayed the fifteenth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework, while simultaneously reinforcing the need for urgent multilateral action on biodiversity" (UNEP 2020). When not deferred, many international meetings that set the tempo for global environmental governance moved online. This shift to virtual sessions represents one of the many strategies environmental IOs employed to adapt to the pandemic and ensure continuity while advocating for stronger action in response to the ecological crisis.

Recent work precisely explores how IOs responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, noting how some built on the crisis to renew themselves and further legitimate their action (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Orsini 2020; Ulybina et al. 2023), while others faced criticism (Johnson 2020) and internal hurdles (Liu 2022). These

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analyses relate to broader themes in IO studies, showing how crises can serve simultaneously as opportunities and as challenges, especially for international bureaucracies (Kreuder-Sonnen 2019; Olsson and Verbeek 2018).

This article contributes to this literature by examining discourse as one specific means IOs use to react to crises. IO scholars, particularly in environmental politics, have closely analyzed how IO discourses put (environmental) problems on the agenda through certain framings (Alejandro et al. 2023), suggest (their) solutions (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), and legitimize their action (Tallberg and Zürn 2019).

Building on this work, we question the kinds of discourses IOs produce when crises shift political attention and priorities. To do so, we make two choices. First, we focus on the environmental sector, selecting UNEP as a representative environmental IO, tasked with advocating for action on the "triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature loss and pollution" (UNEP 2024). Second, we investigate one type of IO discursive production: official statements of UNEP ED Inger Andersen. Less studied than IO reports, these statements serve as key tools for responding to unforeseen events and positioning the organization in a rapidly changing context. We analyze and identify three discursive practices through which IOs like UNEP attempt to keep deprioritized issues on the agenda and sustain action during crises.

This article makes three main contributions. Empirically, it provides insights into how an environmental IO reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to the emerging literature on IOs' response to this crisis and comparative studies on COVID-19 and environmental politics (Van der Ven and Sun 2021). It also expands research on UNEP, a relatively understudied actor in global environmental governance (Biermann et al. 2009; Chasek and Downie 2021; Ivanova 2021) despite its unique position. It precisely examines the cognitive dimension of UNEP leadership, building on work on epistemic communities (Haas 1992) and bureaucratic actors (Bauer 2020; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Ivanova 2021; Jörgens et al. 2024). Methodologically, this article proposes an original approach for conducting discourse analysis applied to a comprehensive corpus of all of the UNEP EDs' statements issued during the pandemic. It presents a coding strategy for uncovering discursive practices, using both deductive and inductive techniques. Theoretically, this article contributes to the literature on IOs and discourse by introducing a framework for identifying and understanding discursive practices performed by IOs during crises. It supplements existing work on agenda-setting by focusing on agenda-keeping and how IOs discursively attempt to sustain action despite shifting priorities. Making sense of these discursive practices is timely amid rising polarization—notably supported by populist leaders during the pandemic (Jaworska and Vásquez 2022)—and conflicts that increasingly overshadow topics that IOs promote but that could appear less urgent to states and the general public.

The article is structured as follows. We first review relevant literature on discourse analysis, particularly in environmental politics and IO studies. Next, we present a typology of IO discursive practices during crises before introducing our case study, corpus, and coding strategy. The final section details the three discursive

practices—*meaning-making*, *relevance-claiming*, and *action-timing*—before concluding with a broader research agenda on IO discourses and global environmental governance.

IO Discourses and the Environmental Crisis

A growing body of literature in international relations (Dunn and Neumann 2016; Epstein 2008) and environmental studies (Feindt and Oels 2005; Hajer 1995; Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Leipold et al. 2019) explores discourses to understand how "physical and social realities are given meaning" (Hajer 1995, 264). According to Hajer, through storylines, discourses shape social reality, therefore influencing public problem construction and their suggested solutions. In global environmental politics, discourse analysis has revealed "how environmental problems and a related set of subjects and objects are discursively produced and rendered governable" (Feindt and Oels 2005, 163). Several studies highlight the influence of discourses on global environmental governance (Stevenson and Dryzek 2012), such as the discourse coalition behind the phase out of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) (Litfin 1995) and the anti-whaling discourse that helped enforce the whaling ban (Epstein 2008). Discourse analysis also provides interesting insights on IO leadership in environmental regimes and governance (Young 1991), with some focusing more specifically on the "catalytic" role of UNEP in the post-Rio reform at the UN (Imber 1993).

In this article, we focus on the discourse produced by an IO. When applied to IOs, discourse analysis provides insights into how institutional narratives shape problem construction and influence the global agenda (Cummings et al. 2018; Felli 2016; Moretti and Pestre 2015). As Alejandro et al. summarize (2023), analyzing discourse exposes IOs' role in setting and framing agendas and issues (Joachim and Dalmer 2016), including as part of their crisis management strategy (Olsson and Verbeek 2018).

Many analyses of IO discourses focus on environmental issues. For instance, Nash (2019, 179) investigates the "polysemic and polyphonic terminology" employed in UN processes addressing the climate and migration nexus, Felli (2016) explores the World Bank's language of resilience, and Hardt et al. (2023) examine how member states use the UN Security Council as a discursive arena on the topic of climate security.

Despite varying focuses, this scholarship underscores the centrality of discursive strategies in global environmental governance, particularly in identifying dominant discourses—for example, ecological modernization (Hajer 1995)—that frame environmental problems and shape governance structures. This article expands this work in two ways: It assesses environmental IO discursive practices in specific situations—crises—when shifting priorities lead global issues to compete for political attention and resources (Olsson and Verbeek 2018); and it introduces a new typology to interpret the meanings of these practices. In doing so, it switches the lens from the substantive content of IO discourses to their strategic composition.

IO Discursive Practices in Times of Crisis: Keeping the Agenda and Maintaining Action

An extensive literature explores the discursive dynamics of global environmental politics (Feindt and Oels 2005; Hajer 1995). Similarly, research examines how IO discourses shape governance by setting problems as actionable items on the international agenda (Joachim and Dalmer 2016; Zahariadis 2016, 5). This article bridges these strands to investigate the kinds of discourses environmental IOs produce, through the specific focus on their response to crises. It questions the role of discourse in IO crisis management while investigating how crises affect day-to-day IO discursive production. A primary challenge IOs face during crises is keeping the core issue of their mandate on the agenda and ensuring continuous action on it despite shifting attention toward immediate needs. This is particularly acute for the environment, approached as in a state of a semipermanent crisis with both short- and long-term dimensions and causes and effects that are often spatially distant (Hale 2024). In this context, environmental IOs frequently engage in *agenda-keeping*, understood as the process of maintaining a public issue as a priority for action amid competing problems (Maertens 2023a). Though agenda-keeping happens in other competitive contexts, crises provide a particularly sharp lens to observe how IOs vie for attention and react to shifting priorities. One strategy IOs may use is precisely discursive practices.

IOs perform discursive practices daily: They engage in representational, socially meaningful, and organized patterns of action that generate meaning.[1] In other words, IOs produce ways of representing things. These discursive practices include, among others, creating simple narratives (Louis and Maertens 2021), circulating abstract buzzwords (Felli 2016), and naturalizing specific worldviews (Epstein 2008). Here we focus on language-based practices used in times of crisis—reactive discursive practices aimed at keeping attention on issues potentially overshadowed by the ongoing crisis. We identify three types: *meaning-making*, *relevance-claiming*, and *action-timing*. This typology depicts and interprets often-overlooked practices that are constitutive of IO political action and connects separately studied key processes of framing, legitimation, and mobilization into an encompassing framework.

First, IOs engage in *meaning-making*: a discursive practice through which they attempt to make sense of their changing environment by connecting their mandate to the crisis. While echoing strategic linkages and bandwagoning as studied in the regime literature (Jinnah 2011), meaning-making practices relate more broadly to framing processes that diagnose problems and offer prognostics for the suggested solutions (Snow and Benford 1988). In the global environmental politics literature, such practices have revealed how problems like climate change are "produced" and "constituted as global governance objects" (Allan 2017).

Second, IOs must assert their relevance to sustain their action, which they do through *relevance-claiming*. Relevance-claiming practices relate to IOs' quest for legitimacy. IO studies have shown how international bureaucracies engage in legitimation processes directed toward IO member states, their partners, so-called

[1] We build on Dunn and Neumann's (2016, 2) definition of discourse as entailing "the representational practices through which meanings are generated" and on Pouliot's (2023, 325) definition of practices as "socially meaningful and organized patterns of activities" or "ways of doing things."

beneficiaries, the public, and even their own staff (Tallberg and Zürn 2019). For environmental IOs, scientific expertise has been key to legitimacy, notably through global environmental assessments that IO secretariats produce and shape to be policy relevant (De Pryck 2023; Mitchell et al. 2006). During crises, IOs assert their relevance to support their legitimacy, even when their core mandate is not directly tied to the crisis at hand.

Third, IOs face a temporal challenge: Mobilizing action on long-term issues becomes even more difficult during crises. To keep the ball rolling and give a tempo for action on their mandate, they turn to *action-timing*: discursive practices that build on the cyclical dimension of public policy formulation and decision-making. These practices rely on time as a socially and individually experienced resource (Verlin 2021) and aim to guide the pace, or tempo, of action. Literature on time and global politics has shown the critical importance of temporality in attention cycles and policy responses, especially for IOs not bound to regular policy cycles (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009). Likewise, in global environmental governance, Manulak (2022) has shown how crises or anniversaries—"temporal focal points"—have spurred substantial changes and reforms. With its long-term dimensions, climate change poses unique governance challenges, as institutions are not well equipped to address "long problems" (Hale 2024). In this context, IOs use action-timing to ride the wave of the urgent crisis while giving rhythm to a maintained actionable agenda.

The three categories are not absolute: Linguistic strategies and wordings may overlap within these analytical constructs designed to unpack how IO discursively navigate crises. The following pages illustrate how these practices unfold in UNEP ED's statements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unpacking UNEP's Discursive Practices

UNEP has unique characteristics that impact its position within global environmental governance and influence how it navigates complex international dynamics. Its institutional design and resource constraints compel UNEP to rely on words and discursive strategies to fulfill its mandate.

Leaning on Words: UNEP's Voice in Global Environmental Governance

Created in the aftermath of the 1972 Stockholm Earth Summit to address the perceived need for a coordinated UN approach to environmental issues (Ivanova 2010), UNEP was founded with a threefold mandate: reporting on the state of the environment, catalyzing international environmental policy and law, and coordinating environmental activities across UN agencies (Bauer 2020, 285). Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, UNEP is often considered a modest institution (Biermann and Pattberg 2008), with 1,330 employees and a budget of US$ 437.8 million in 2022, 95 percent of which relies on voluntary contributions (UNEP 2022).

UNEP's limited resources stem from its peculiar institutional design; as a subsidiary organ rather than a specialized agency, it lacks the legal personality to independently adopt treaties or regulations or to set its own budget (Biermann and Pattberg 2008). This has led observers to question UNEP's capacity and authority to address the manifold ecological crises within its mandate (Bauer 2020). Moreover, since its foundation, UNEP

has operated within an increasingly complex global environmental governance framework, fragmented by the surge of multilateral environmental agreements and specialized units (Ivanova 2021; Mee 2005). Departing from its original normative mandate, the organization faced increasing demands for operational support that spread thin its already scarce resources (Ivanova 2021, 88). Combined with pervasive competition among UN institutions due to overlapping mandates and resource constraints that characterize global environmental governance (Ivanova 2021), these features prompted contrasted diagnoses regarding UNEP's contributions (Bauer 2020).

Despite these challenges, the literature also highlights how, to some extent, the organization effectively fulfills its mandate. Assessing its performance since its foundation, Ivanova's (2021) research nuances its weaknesses, noting UNEP's success as an agenda-setter, catalyst for policy processes, and provider of scientific environmental assessments. Wanneau and Orsini (2023) show how UNEP leverages its expertise and ensuing authority to advance emerging environmental topics and position itself as a normative compass in climate governance, securing respect and attention from member states and UN partners. Similarly, Louis and Maertens (2021) highlight UNEP's ability to tap into its expertise for legitimacy amid competition among multilateral actors. Additional research underscores UNEP's unique position within the UN system and limited visibility, which grants it greater flexibility, most notably in its discourse (Louis and Maertens 2021; Orsini 2020).

A strand of literature precisely focuses on UNEP's discourse, particularly how it frames environmental and climate change issues as security concerns, thus advancing the climate security agenda (Maertens 2023b). By linking environmental issues with security, UNEP's publications portray the environment as a security threat, often with a focus on the Global South and international interventions (Dalmer 2021; Krampe 2021), but also help raise attention to environmental protection in times of armed conflict—a form of agenda-keeping.

Drawing from these insights, the article explores UNEP's discourse during the COVID-19 crisis, a period when environmental priorities risked being sidelined. While previous work has examined mainly how UNEP participates in setting the environmental agenda, here we center on the discursive practices UNEP employed to maintain it amid shifting global priorities, contributing to the literature on UNEP's role in global environmental governance.

Corpus: UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen's Statements

We studied all speeches, statements, and op-eds[2] issued by UNEP ED Inger Andersen between January 30, 2020—when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a "public health emergency of international concern" (PHEIC) (WHO 2020)—and May 5, 2023, when the WHO lifted the PHEIC (WHO 2023). Andersen, a former head of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and former Vice President for sustainable development at the World Bank, became UNEP's eighth ED in 2019, following the

[2] We gather these three categories designated by UNEP under the umbrella term of *statement*.

resignation of Erik Solheim in 2018. After taking office amid a troubled period for UNEP, Andersen was reappointed for a second four-year mandate in 2023.

According to Ivanova (2010), UNEP's institutional design grants its executive head a crucial role. Internally, the ED "is largely responsible for providing UNEP with direction and vision"; externally, the position is "critical for securing steady funding and integral to keeping UNEP and environmental concerns in the public eye" (51). While we lack information about the degree of consensus within UNEP on the ED's statements or the contributors involved in crafting them, we treat Andersen's communication as a key representation of UNEP's strategic direction and a medium to investigate its discursive practices. Less studied than UNEP's reports and rarely compiled into one systematic and coherent corpus, these statements respond directly to ongoing events, making them well suited to deciphering the discursive strategies IOs use to position themselves.

Combining Deductive and Inductive Discourse Analysis Techniques

We retrieved all of Andersen's statements from UNEP's online repository within the specified time frame. The final corpus comprises 251 statements issued between February 18, 2020,[3] and April 3, 2023 (Supplementary Appendix A; those cited in the text are listed in Supplementary Appendix B[4]). Over these thirty-nine months, Andersen spoke regularly, averaging about seven statements per month, with some exceptions (e.g., during the early stages of the pandemic, with only one statement per month, and in summer 2021, with ten per month). Typically brief (350–1,250 words), the statements were delivered across diverse settings (international or regional events, UN arenas, UNEP-led public or internal meetings, public speeches) and addressed varied audiences (ministers, member state representatives, UN partners, civil society, etc.) yet consistently feature similar discursive patterns.

Our analysis followed a three-stage method. First, using a deductive approach, we manually coded the corpus with Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), applying an initial codebook derived from theoretical hypotheses on agenda-keeping practices as a part of a larger research project.[5] This coding scheme helped us identify segments maintaining attention on environmental issues despite the prevailing COVID-19 crisis. Figure 1 depicts the frequency of these coded segments in our corpus across the pandemic, with a noticeable peak within the first year.

[3] Though UNEP released statements between January 30 and February 20, 2022, none were attributable to ED Inger Andersen; rather, they were attributable to the former interim ED Joyce Msuya.
[4] Each statement from our analyzed corpus, listed in Supplementary Appendix B, is indicated with an asterisk (*).
[5] "First Things First! How to Keep the United Nations Environmental Agenda in Times of Crisis," research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (subsidy 100017_200834).

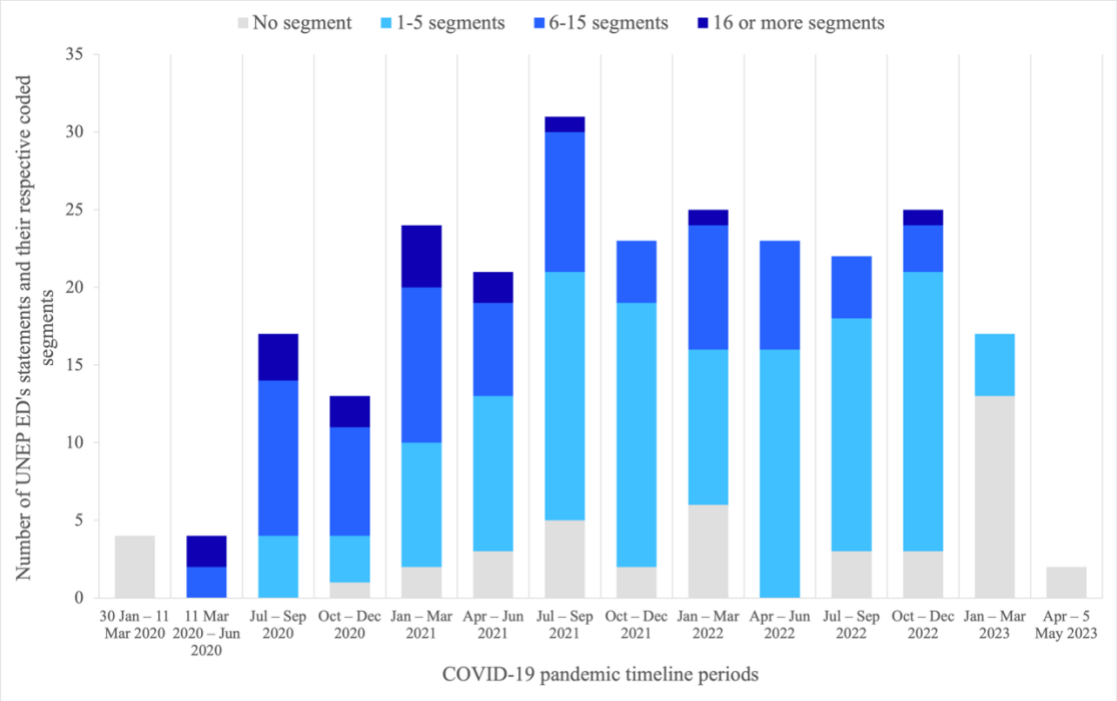

Figure 1

UNEP Discourse During COVID-19: Distribution of the Encoded Statements over Time

Second, we adopted an inductive approach and reviewed the coded segments to group them into broader trends through keywords and discursive patterns. Third, we used mind-mapping techniques to consolidate patterns into three main types of discursive practices. This iterative method ensured the empirical grounding of our conceptual innovations, allowing us to characterize discursive practices. While issues of intentionality or the study of broader social contexts of statement production and reception are important, they are beyond the scope of the article, given the applied methodology. Such a method also prevents us from perfectly matching coded segments with the three categories of practices to assess their prevalence. However, the analysis of illustrative codes shows that the identified discursive patterns emerged after COVID-19 evolved from a public health emergency into a pandemic (March 2020) and progressively declined over time (see Supplementary Appendix C). The following section systematically analyzes the corpus to interpret the meaningful composition of IO discourse in a changing context.

Keeping the Environmental Agenda Alive: UNEP's Discursive Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge for advocates of long-term action on issues like environmental protection but also opened opportunities to highlight specific aspects of the ecological crisis. Our analysis of UNEP ED's statements reveals the discursive practices through which UNEP attempted to

make sense of the health crisis and keep the environmental agenda alive, while maintaining relevance and timeliness. We identify three types of practices, summarized in Figure 2: *meaning-making*, which links crises, merges solutions, and orders priorities; *relevance-claiming*, seen in discourses showcasing pre-existing expertise and adaptability, selling institutional solutions or invoking multilateralism; and *action-timing*, which creates a sense of urgency, builds on crisis-related momentum, and connects past, present, and future temporal (policy) horizons. The following sections discuss these practices with illustrative quotes and systematic analyses of keywords and expressions.

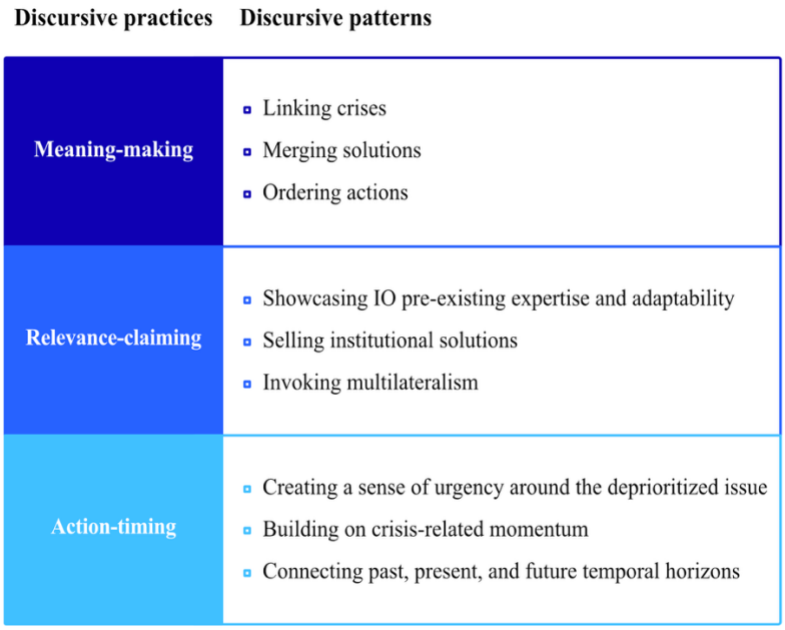

Figure 2

IO Discursive Practices in Times of Crisis

Meaning-Making

The first discursive practice, *meaning-making*, refers to the process of interpreting unfolding events. In this case, UNEP makes sense of the environmental and health crises—both taken jointly and separately—while signaling potential solutions. More surprisingly, it also suggests a form of prioritization between crises.

First, UNEP establishes *interlinkages between the environmental crisis and the pandemic*, framing ecological breakdown as a public health issue and COVID-19 as an ecological concern. While UNEP's consideration of the environment–health nexus predates the pandemic and Andersen's tenure, this linking framing intensified during the height of the public health crisis. As early as April 2020, UNEP remarks that "the health of people and the health of our planet are intimately connected" (UNEP 2020a*)—a connection that is also conveyed by

the extensive use of metaphors such as "healthy planet,"[6] with 101 occurrences of "healthy/healthier planet/environment/nature" found in our corpus. Statements allude to two levels of linkages: the pandemic as a consequence of environmental degradation and both crises as stemming from shared causes. Andersen's rhetoric portrays the pandemic as a symptom of ecological breakdown, "a direct warning that nature can take no more" (UNEP 2020d*), a "symptom of our planet's ailing health" (UNEP 2021k*), and an "entirely predictable result of humanity's destruction of nature" (UNEP 2020d*). This linkage is further illustrated when Andersen, reflecting on the first year of the pandemic, states,

> In 2020, the world's attention turned to the COVID-19 pandemic. But even as we poured all of [*sic*] energy and resources into tackling it, many pointed to wider issues as contributing factors. Nature and biodiversity loss. Climate change. Pollution and waste. The three planetary crises. (UNEP 2021i*)

Andersen also points to shared drivers behind both crises: "high-carbon and resource-intensive economic models" (UNEP 2021m*) and "humanity's relentless expansion and unsustainable consumption and production" (UNEP 2020g*). Interlinkages are gradually broadened, with COVID-19 being situated within the wider scope of "infectious diseases with pandemic potential" (UNEP 2021q*) and, eventually, broader human health concerns (UNEP 2023*). By connecting the pandemic and health concerns to the environment, Andersen establishes causal linkages between these two policy areas, which provide the essential bedrock for a set of merged solutions.

Second, UNEP makes sense of the crises by suggesting *common solutions* that address them simultaneously. Andersen calls for treating "human, animal and planetary health […] as a single interconnected issue in planning and policy-making" (UNEP 2020l*). Moving away from a sectoral approach, she advocates for sustaining or strengthening environmental policies despite the pandemic, which, she notes, "can save lives and reduce the burden on healthcare systems" (UNEP 2022j*). For example, public transportation policies "can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, save energy, reduce road fatalities, alleviate congestion and thereby people's health" (UNEP 2020c*), particularly as "poor air quality has been closely linked to vulnerability to COVID-19" (UNEP 2020l*). Consistently promoting "a green recovery," Andersen encourages member states to "build back better" by aligning recovery with environmental agendas, referencing the Paris Agreement and the Biodiversity framework. A prime example of this cross-sectoral approach is the "propulsion" of One Health, a framework linking human, animal, and ecosystem health (WHO 2017). Andersen frequently advocates for the adoption of the One Health approach, emphasizing that "[t]he weakest link [in One Health] is environmental health. We have to fix this" (UNEP 2020e*).

Third, meaning-making involves *ordering actions* to prevent the environmental agenda from being subsumed under the health policy domain. Andersen frequently contrasts the ecological crisis with the health

[6] The expression also appeared in the theme of the anniversary summit held in 2022, "Stockholm+50: A Healthy Planet for the Prosperity of All—Our Responsibility, Our Opportunity."

crisis, emphasizing their distinct timelines—"[C]limate change will not be shooed away in one year or five" but "will linger for decades" (UNEP 2020f*); costs—"[c]limate change, pollution and biodiversity carry price tags that are heftier"(UNEP 2020d*); and casualties—"a planetary emergency that will cause far more pain than COVID-19" (UNEP 2021h*). Occasionally, Andersen even elevates environmental concerns above the health crisis, depicting the post-pandemic recovery as "going out of the COVID frying pan into the climate fire" (UNEP 2020d*) and warning that "[t]he light at the end of pandemic tunnel is looking increasingly like a fire" (UNEP 2021j*). At its climax, this framing even challenges the severity of the health crisis relative to the ecological crisis: "The COVID-19 pandemic is a global tragedy. But it is not a one-off, or even the biggest threat humanity faces. It is an overture of what is to come if we do not transform our economies and societies" (UNEP 2021n*). This argument is then leveraged to prioritize environmental policies, with the pandemic being devised as part of the environmental meta-problem. It positions UNEP's suggested actions as the "one roadmap to recovery" (UNEP 2020b*), tying COVID-19's response packages to progress on UNEP's objectives:

> Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change remain our ONLY option for a durable recovery. (UNEP 2020b*)

Andersen thus borders the pandemic response within the environmental realm. Such calls for prioritization are often framed as moral imperatives, asserting that "we must embed sustainability into COVID-19 recovery" (UNEP 2020f*) or warning against saddling the next generation "with a pandemic debt and a destroyed planet" (UNEP 2020k*).

Ultimately, meaning-making introduces a specific lens through which to interpret unfolding events. As the international attention for the ecological crisis fades, UNEP highlights the shared causes of the pandemic and environmental degradation, justifying its continued actions and even expanded role in global health.

Relevance-Claiming

The second discursive practice we identify and coin as *relevance-claiming* appears in the way Andersen positions UNEP as a pertinent actor capable of addressing both the ecological and health crises through its adaptability and institutional procedures.

First, relevance-claiming operates by showcasing *UNEP's adaptability* in the management of emerging crises. While adaptation is traditionally mentioned as one of the answers to climate change, alongside mitigation and resilience, adaptability refers here to UNEP's ability to evolve in a rapidly changing operational environment. In the statements of the early stages of the pandemic, adaptability refers to how UNEP remained "open for business" through virtual means during lockdowns (UNEP 2020a*). Andersen declares that she is "deeply proud" that UNEP staff have "swiftly adapted, working virtually" to "continue to deliver on [their] mandate for Member States" (UNEP 2020b*), underscoring that working virtually has become a "new reality"

(UNEP 2020l*). Toward the middle and end of the pandemic, there is an increased insistence on adaptability beyond the examples of virtual settings: "[I]f COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that we adapt when it matters" (UNEP 2022c*). Adaptability, then, becomes a key value of the organization and a driver of its missions:

> In all these parallel tracts of action, we seek to remain operationally agile and flexible. [. . .] To swiftly adapt to meet emerging environmental priorities. This is UNEP's mantra. (UNEP 2022a*)

The use of the term *mantra* shows how central adaptability has become for the organization, echoing its historical agility (Ivanova 2010). Relevance-claiming is not limited to UNEP's capability to change its ways and procedures during and after lockdowns but also extends to the reuse of pre-existing expertise to address both crises, relying, for instance, on UNEP's science-based mechanisms already in place. Such a use of pre-existing expertise appears when she advocates for the adoption of an "integrated human, animal and environmental health expertise and policy," on which UNEP was already working before the pandemic (UNEP 2020e*). This rhetoric also positions UNEP at the center of the UN environmental expertise and suggests potential collaborations with other UN bodies in areas where it can strengthen its role, such as nuclear contamination or chemical and hazardous waste (UNEP 2021o*).

Second, relevance-claiming operates through the *selling of procedures* led by UNEP. The first type of procedure connects to UNEP's original mandate, as it involves producing science to strengthen the connections between environmental and health challenges. For example, Andersen quotes statistics produced for the 2021 UNEP Emissions Gap report, such as "green COVID-19 recovery spending could knock 25 percent off emissions by 2030" (UNEP 2021n*). Also, using the argument that "poor air quality has been closely linked to vulnerability to COVID-19," she puts forward a collaboration between UNEP, "the UN and private sector partners to launch the world's largest urban air quality data platform" (UNEP 2020l*). Emphasizing UNEP's role as a scientific actor hence promotes scientific institutions and procedures. A second type of procedure relates to UNEP's technical expertise and support for member states and other UN agencies. Andersen mentions UNEP's relevance in developing "chemicals and hazardous waste management" or "waste management systems" for helping deal with the mass production of plastic products, such as masks, used in response to the crisis (UNEP 2020b*). Furthermore, she capitalizes on recent and upcoming agreements and events to establish existing institutional mechanisms as *the* solution. Examples include UNEP-led events such as the "Global Roundtable hosted by the UNEP Finance Initiative," where "Alliance members committed to implement deep greenhouse gas emissions reductions in the 16% to 29% range by 2025 from 2019" (UNEP 2020l*); the "UN Environment Assembly 5.2 in 2022," which "provides an opportunity to accelerate a green recovery" (UNEP 2021r*); or Stockholm+50, which, according to Andersen, "must give us new ways to accelerate the transformation" (UNEP 2022g*).

Third, relevance-claiming operates through the *invocation of multilateralism*. Andersen often celebrates the main achievements and milestones of international environmental negotiations in different areas of

environmental action: the Paris Agreement for climate change, the Montreal Protocol for chemical pollution, and the Convention on Biological Diversity for biodiversity protection. She also highlights recent successes, including the 2021 global phaseout of leaded petrol, the 2016 Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, and the 2022 Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Reminding these milestones conveys a sense of progress and hope in the future of negotiations, which aligns with what Aykut et al. (2021) refer to as the "incantatory nature" of multilateralism in climate governance. This incantatory dimension is encapsulated by the expression "Nairobi spirit"—which Andersen evoked twice in 2022 to reinvigorate the multilateral process—a reference to the discussions on a future global treaty on plastic pollution that took place during UNEA-5 in the Kenyan capital (UNEP 2022h*, 2022i*). Adding to milestones and ongoing discussions, Andersen considers that

> "[i]nclusive and effective multilateralism" remains "the only way to solve the challenges we face: If one of us has COVID, we all have COVID. If one has climate change, we all have climate change." (UNEP 2021c*)

She presents collective multilateral efforts as the only solution to both crises. Relevance-claiming unfolds in the way Andersen presents UNEP as a pragmatic and adaptable organization that can provide expertise and technical assistance to member states and other UN bodies on many intertwined aspects of the pandemic and ecological crisis. Her commitment to multilateral processes further positions UNEP as a key player in both past and future international negotiations, in which it can act as a catalyst for more ambitious pledges and agreements.

Action-Timing

A third and final discursive practice, coined as *action-timing*, relates to the role of time. By referring to the overlapping temporalities of both crises and mentioning diverging temporal horizons, UNEP exploits time as a discursive resource to justify maintaining action on the environment despite attention focused on the pandemic.

First, UNEP's statements create a *sense of urgency*, emphasizing the need to prioritize action on environmental protection. On the one hand, Andersen invokes the notion of "emergency" to qualify the "climate emergency" (UNEP 2020d*), "an emergency of our own making" (UNEP 2022e*) or "the needs of a planet and people in emergency" (UNEP 2022a*), even using a medical metaphor when she exhorts to "act urgently on the triple planetary crisis and pull the planet out of the emergency room" (UNEP 2021q*). This framing instates the ecological crisis as a critical priority. On the other hand, out of the 251 statements analyzed, 67 rely on the vocabulary of urgency. They highlight the urgency of various dimensions of the ecological crisis, such as "the urgency of the climate crisis" (UNEP 2022k*) or plastic pollution, which "must be tackled urgently" (UNEP 2022f*). Statements also mention the "urgent need" to "restore the Earth" (UNEP 2021l*) or to "halt the decline of biodiversity and the fragmentation of habitats" (UNEP 2022i*). Yet most of the time,

the statements portray "action" as the "urgent" matter with specified objectives: "urgent action to lift the smog of air pollution" (UNEP 2020h*) or "urgent action on plastic pollution" (UNEP 2022b*). In some cases, the responsible actors for implementing such urgent action are very broadly designated as "multilateral action" or "humanity." In others, direct calls are made, such as Africa being invited "to take direct and urgent responsibility in mobilizing finance" (UNEP 2021r*) and the "biggest polluters" being called upon to "urgently deal with their own emissions" (UNEP 2022e*). These statements therefore create a sense of urgency that justifies continued environmental action despite the health emergency.

UNEP also builds on the "now or never" motto, echoing the UN Secretary-General's "make or break moment for the planet" (UN 2020). The year 2021 is presented as a turning point: "The time is NOW" (capitalization in original) as Andersen asserted to Danish parliamentarians (UNEP 2021c*). 2021 is defined as a "pivotal year" that "must mark the beginning of the era of action" (UNEP 2021d*) with the hopeful message that "if 2020 was a disaster, 2021 can and must be the year humanity began making peace with nature and secured a fair, just and sustainable future for everyone" (UNEP 2021g*).

Second, UNEP *builds on the pandemic's momentum* to spur environmental action, often presenting the ongoing turmoil and the recovery as opportunities:

> [The COVID-19 pandemic] has also provided us with a window of opportunity, through stimulus packages, to prioritize circularity as part of a green recovery that supports the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement and other international commitments. (UNEP 2020j*)

> We must act now by taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by pandemic recovery. (UNEP 2020i*)

At the same time, statements condemn "missed opportunities or even climate negative examples" (UNEP 2020m*) (in this case related to the EU airline bailouts) and spur action using a motivational tone to "seize on those moments" (UNEP 2020c*). UNEP encourages timing environmental action in alignment with pandemic recovery policies, warning against deferred action—"COVID-19 has delayed these summits and complicated their preparation. Again, this is no excuse for inaction" (UNEP 2021h*)—and advocating for acceleration using the image of the "emergency gear" (UNEP 2021s*). Andersen relies on motivational interpellations, insisting that environmental action should be prioritized: "Nations must prioritize a green post-pandemic recovery" (UNEP 2021a*). She also spurs action by congratulating continuous efforts despite the challenging context (UNEP 2021f*).

Third, UNEP strategically *navigates the different temporal horizons* at play, connecting past decisions to current struggles and asserting predictability and continuity. Andersen fixes present action in the future using a near-threatening tone, emphasizing that the pandemic was predictable and could have been prevented: "The mistakes of the past don't just haunt us. The mistakes of the past are also the mistakes of the present" (UNEP 2022d*). By tying the present crisis to past inaction, UNEP stresses continuity, urging that long-term environmental action be prioritized. UNEP's statements also situate the ecological crisis within a broader

temporal frame, portraying a daunting future that the pandemic helped reveal: "[T]he fact that all of a sudden people saw what a real shock these external shocks to our planet, what it could do, I think has caused a degree of realization that climate change is so much more serious" (UNEP 2021e*). Andersen paints a bleak future, asserting that "[w]e are a species in peril, living on a planet in peril" (UNEP 2021q*). Yet she also points to solutions, acting today to prevent the worst tomorrow:

> The choices we make in pandemic recovery and in our everyday lives, can save millions of lives and billions of dollars each year, preserve the natural world and take us all, together, into a greener and healthier future. So let us all choose wisely. (UNEP 2021p*)

By extrapolating a threatening future, exemplified by the pandemic, UNEP uses the ongoing health crisis to maintain attention on long-term challenges that still require urgent action today. Time serves as a productive discursive resource to drive political action during crises.

Conclusions

In this article, we show that, as the COVID-19 pandemic took center stage and shifted global attention away from environmental concerns, UNEP performed a range of discursive practices, maintaining attention to its core mandate. By interlinking health and environmental crises, emphasizing its expertise and multilateral solutions, and sustaining a sense of urgency, UNEP positioned ecological issues as pivotal to both immediate recovery and long-term global governance. In 2022, UNEP joined the existing One Health Alliance alongside the WHO, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Organisation for Animal Health, marking its efforts to bridge environmental and health sectors (World Organisation for Animal Health 2022). While UNEP mostly acted within the scope of its mandate, it also took the bold step of positioning itself on a topic not directly central to its activities, something many IOs did even at times verging on the absurd (Ulybina et al. 2023). It drew on expected strategies like issue linkage (Jinnah 2011) and appeals to expertise (Louis and Maertens 2021), but it also delivered politically sensitive messages, especially when urging governments to prioritize long-term recovery.

Focusing on discourse, this article develops an original conceptual framework along three discursive practices: *meaning-making*, *relevance-claiming*, and *action-timing*. Together, these three categories offer a coherent lens for interpreting discourses that IOs produce. Empirically, practices complement each other, as illustrated in the case of UNEP. By showcasing the overlapping and diverging temporalities of competing crises, UNEP reinforces meaning-making processes. This framing, in turn, supports the organization's relevance claim, positioning it as an actor with pre-existing expertise, experience, and long-term objectives crucial for navigating interconnected crises. As conceptual tools, the three categories help specify the different ways in which IOs generate meanings in times of crisis.

Beyond this case, the article investigates how environmental IOs react to short-term crises that risk overshadowing the ecological agenda. By focusing exclusively on discourse, it expands the literature on IOs

and crises in two ways: First, it supports existing work that displays crises as opportunities for IO expansion (Kreuder-Sonnen 2019); second, it introduces novel conceptual tools to capture the range of policy responses IOs may deploy regardless of their material resources, on which most work concentrates (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Ulybina et al. 2023). The article also makes two contributions to the literature on IO discourse: It renews framing analysis by acknowledging IOs' discursive creativity in both preserving and transforming their mandate, and it shifts attention from substantive analyses of IO discourse to discursive practices. While some of these practices, like connecting crises, may seem expected, together they form a repertoire that IOs may mobilize to defend their mandate and assert relevance in a competitive environment. Moreover, the proposed conceptual framework extends beyond environmental IOs, applying equally to organizations promoting cultural heritage protection during armed conflicts or women's rights during economic crises. Identifying agenda-keeping discursive practices and their meanings enhances our understanding not only of how IOs function and adapt to challenging contexts but also of how, *in fine*, they pursue their problem-solving role.

A research agenda emerges from expanding the article's empirical and theoretical contributions. First, investigating the internal procedures and institutional dynamics behind the statement preparation could uncover potential dissent or alternative viewpoints, enriching or complicating the organization's external discourse. Such a focus would supplement the literature on UNEP but also that on IOs as discourse producers and on power dynamics within global governance institutions.

Second, to deepen UNEP's study, future research could explore how these practices are received to evaluate the broader influence and reach of the organization's communication. This would help assess the effectiveness of agenda-keeping discursive practices across different contexts and among varied target audiences.

Finally, applying this conceptual framework to other cases by investigating the discursive practices of various actors under pressure (e.g., NGOs, nonenvironmental IOs) and documenting reactions to shifting priorities triggered by other types of crises (e.g., armed conflicts, humanitarian emergencies, political backlash, budget cuts) would allow for testing its broader relevance. As competition for political attention heightens, understanding the mechanisms through which global environmental governance can be sustained beyond and above crises becomes increasingly urgent.

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