Comments received and to strengthen in this draft:

- voices and perspectives of Indigenous Peoples
- wider context of peace, war and armed conflict
- build on the draft UNGA resolution on "Follow-up to the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change (A/80/L.?? - available mid-March 2026)
- lay groundwork in 2026 for a possible UNGASS in 2027

Proposal for a UN General Assembly Special Session on Climate Change

[draft revised: 2 March 2026]

Thirty years after the adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), CO_2 equivalent emissions from fossil fuel combustion and other sources continue to increase.[1] Fossil fuels are the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, driving the climate crisis that fuels extreme weather, spreads disease, and causes lasting and devastating harm to human and planetary health.[2]

2026 is the 40th anniversary of the UN International Year of Peace (1986). Yet climate change and its causes are undermining the social determinants of health - leading to biodiversity loss, food scarcity, mass displacement and increased conflict.

The annual UNFCCC CoPs have been stalled by the requirement for consensus, including on the phasing out of fossil fuels. In January 2026 the CoP30 President called for a complementary approach not constrained by consensus, operating at greater speed, focused on implementation.[3]

A United Nations (UN) General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on climate change – grounded in human rights and a just transition – offers the best hope of clearing the international logjam of UN Member States' climate inaction.

What is a UN General Assembly Special Session? (UNGASS)

The General Assembly is the UN's main deliberative, policy-making and representative body. Voting is by simple majority (not consensus) on most matters.

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[1] United Nations Environment Programme (2025). *Emissions Gap Report 2025: Off target – Continued collective inaction puts global temperature goal at risk* https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/48854.

[2] Cradle to Grave: The Health Toll of Fossil Fuels and the Imperative for a Just Transition Global Climate & Health Alliance, 2025

[3] UNFCCC, Open letter from CoP30 President, André Aranha Corrêa do Lago, 27 January 2026.

The General Assembly may convene at any time in a so-called Special Session (UNGASS) to address urgent, wide-ranging concerns, as seen in previous UNGASS on HIV, corruption, COVID-19, the world drug problem, and the welfare of children.

Civil society participation is an important component of these events. ECOSOC-accredited NGOs[4] participate as of right, and accreditation can be extended to other NGOs with particular interest in the topic. An UNGASS in New York can convene a greater diversity of civil society organisations than participate in a UNFCCC CoP.

Why doesn't climate action at the UNFCCC CoPs[5] match the urgency and scale of the climate crisis?

The intended voting procedure in the draft UNFCCC Rules of Procedure (rule 42), which provides for two-thirds majority voting, has never been agreed. Voting remains by (undefined) 'consensus.' As we saw at CoP30, progress can be blocked by a small group of countries, depending on the interpretation of consensus by the chairperson at the time. This limitation has long stalled substantive progress on phasing out fossil fuels and progress towards a just transition.

Further, the entire UN human rights machinery (which today includes the human rights treaties, their monitoring bodies, Special Rapporteur, secretariat (OHCHR), Universal Periodic Review, and UN Human Rights Council) was bypassed in the drafting of the climate treaties. The only reference to human rights in the climate treaties is in the Preamble to the Paris Agreement. As a result, States' legal obligations under international human rights law are barely mentioned at the annual CoPs. This is a huge oversight and missed opportunity.

What are the opportunities offered by the 2025 ICJ advisory opinion on climate change?

At the International Court of Justice (ICJ) hearings on climate change in 2024, major fossil fuel consuming and exporting States argued that they have no obligations under international law beyond what was expressly stated in the climate treaties (UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, Paris Agreement). *Thankfully, in its advisory opinion in 2025, the ICJ flatly disagreed*.

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[4] The UN database of ECOSOC-accredited NGOs can be searched by country and organisational type.
[5] Conferences of Parties (CoPs) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

We now have strong, far-reaching legal advice from the ICJ on States' obligations to respond to climate change that includes obligations under the climate treaties, UN human rights and environmental treaties, and customary international law. But the ICJ advice is just that – advice – and in itself won't break the logjam of State inaction under the climate treaties, which is grounded in part in the CoPs' fatal requirement for consensus.

How have UN General Assembly Special Sessions addressed previous global threats?

Most memorably, in 2001 the UNGASS on HIV/AIDS marked a turning point in the global response to the HIV pandemic. The resulting UN General Assembly Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS:

- anchored States' response to HIV with time-bound commitments to rights-based, concrete action;
- mobilised civil society to advocate for a strong Declaration, publicise it, and follow up on States' commitments;
- called for a global health fund (which led to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria); and
- requested the UN Secretary-General to initiate a periodic monitoring process to track States' progress on implementing their commitments. With UNAIDS' support States' periodic reporting has continued to this day.

What could an UNGASS on climate change achieve?

An UNGASS on climate change could break the logjam by reaffirming States' legal obligations under human rights and environmental law, as well as the climate treaties, as affirmed by the ICJ. Held at the UN headquarters in New York, it could facilitate greater participation from smaller global South States, which would be able to draw on the resources of their permanent missions. It would also allow participation from a greater diversity of civil society organisations than typically attend a UNFCCC CoP.

The resulting UN General Assembly resolution, perhaps titled 'Declaration of Commitment to Climate Action and Just Transition', should welcome the ICJ advisory opinion and include commitments to implement the full legal obligations identified by the ICJ.

For example, the resolution could include commitments to monitoring and reporting on *human rights-based processes in developing and implementing* Nationally Determined Commitments and National Action Plans, including through the meaningful participation of affected communities, workers, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth and marginalized groups. The resolution should complement, not duplicate, States' obligations under the climate treaties.

Most importantly, the resolution should call for the UN Secretary-General to report periodically to the General Assembly on progress achieved in realising States' commitments in the Declaration.

It could also request States to finalise the Paris Rulebook with simple majority voting.

The process leading up to an UNGASS will also determine the outcomes. An UNGASS provides an opportunity for civil society engagement and advocacy at national and regional levels to put human rights at the centre of global climate action.

What are the next steps?

The government of Vanuatu initiated the 2023 General Assembly resolution requesting for the ICJ advisory opinion. In February-March 2026 Vanuatu is consulting with other States on a follow up General Assembly resolution on the ICJ advisory opinion.

Build support through 2026 for an UNGASS on climate change and just transition in 2027.

Endorsements:
Add constituencies to approach with name and email for verification

- Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER)

[public health NGOs tbc - World Federation of Public Health Associations, European Public Health Association (EUPHA), Global Network for Academic Public Health (GNAPH), nurses, medical students etc]

Information:
David Patterson LLM, MSc, HonMFPH, PhD Candidate
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Background Reading

- easy-read: ‘Pitch for a UN General Assembly Special Session on Climate Change’ PEAH - Policies for Equitable Access to Health. Available in Spanish.

- Legal analysis: 'What’s next for the ICJ Advisory Opinion? A proposal for a UN General Assembly Special Session on Climate Change’ Opinio Juris

- Bigger picture: ‘Human rights underpin climate action for global health and just transition: from from awareness and analysis to political and legal action’ Journal of Public Health

- Background on broader health impacts of fossil fuels: Cradle to Grave: The Health Toll of Fossil Fuels and the Imperative for a Just Transition Global Climate & Health Alliance, 2025