

Poor environment exacts rising health costs

A healthy environment prevents nearly a quarter of the global disease burden by providing clean air, safe water, and stable climatic conditions. World Environmental Health Day on 26 September 2026, was launched by the Council of the International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH) – a nonprofit organization established in 1986 and based in London, England. The IFEH aims to disseminate knowledge about environmental health among people and promote cooperation between countries to improve the environmental situation of our Earth.

The 2026 theme is “Environmental Health: Standing with Science to Protect Communities.” This year’s theme directly aligns with WHO’s science-based decision-making narrative and highlights the role of environmental health professionals as applied public health scientists translating research into policy, regulation and community protection.

Good health depends on clean air, a stable climate, a preserved natural environment, as well as access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene. It also requires protection from harmful radiation, unsafe chemical management and unhealthy working conditions. A healthy environment could prevent nearly a quarter of the global disease burden. The ongoing environmental crisis is profoundly affecting health as climate change intensifies, biodiversity declines and pollution becomes ubiquitous. The health impacts of poor environmental conditions occur not only directly but also indirectly, through effects on food production, migration, economic instability and social inequalities.

Urgent action is needed to transform how we live, work, produce, consume and govern. Strengthening primary prevention is essential, given the substantial reduction in disease burden it can offer, as well as the potential savings in healthcare costs and resources. Cross-sectoral collaboration is crucial in addressing the environmental determinants of health, including the health, energy, industry, agriculture and transport sectors. Integrating actions across these sectors often leads to significant co-benefits

and cost reductions. Climate change is no longer a distant threat for World Heritage sites – its impacts are already visible across some of the world’s most iconic places. Coral reefs are affected by bleaching events due to warming oceans, glaciers inscribed on the World Heritage List are retreating rapidly, and prolonged droughts, floods and wildfires are placing increasing pressure on ecosystems, historic cities and archaeological sites alike. The connection between nature and climate is becoming more visible every year. Across the world, rising temperatures, floods, droughts, wildfires, biodiversity loss, and pollution are affecting people, communities, and economies, consistently giving us signals that something is not okay.

Flooding continues to destroy homes, farmlands, roads, and critical infrastructure across several states. Coastal communities face erosion and rising sea levels that threaten livelihoods, while changing rainfall patterns continue to affect agricultural productivity and food security. Urban centres are grappling with rising temperatures, pollution, waste management challenges, and the pressures of rapid urbanization. In oil-producing communities, environmental degradation and gas flaring remain significant concerns, affecting ecosystems, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, and impacting public health and community well-being.

World Environment Day is an opportunity to reflect on the role we all play in shaping a healthier environment and a more sustainable future. Governments can strengthen environmental governance and ensure climate commitments translate into measurable results. Businesses can invest in cleaner technologies and sustainable practices. Financial institutions and development partners can support climate adaptation, renewable energy, and resilient infrastructure. Citizens can contribute through responsible consumption, energy conservation, waste reduction, and environmental stewardship. The forests, rivers, wetlands, oceans, and ecosystems that sustain life today will shape the quality of life available to future generations.



Gaza shows why humanitarian aid cannot be militarised

Private contractors and heavily secured distribution sites blurred the distinction between relief and security operations

SHANNON BOSCH

FOR six months in 2025, the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation operated a radically different model for delivering food to Palestinians in Gaza. The foundation didn’t disclose its donors, but received at least USD 30 million from the US government. Many established aid organisations refused to co-operate, citing concerns about transparency and independent oversight.

Instead of distributing aid through hundreds of established humanitarian sites, the foundation concentrated distribution at just four heavily secured sites. Three were in a military zone in southern Gaza and one was in central Gaza City. Armed private security contractors helped operate the system.

The foundation says it distributed 187 million meals and demonstrated there was a better way to deliver aid to Gaza, which is reported to be adopted in US President Donald Trump’s Peace plan.

My new research shows this privatised, militarised model should stand as a warning against the risks of transforming humanitarian relief in occupied territories from an instrument of protection to one of control.

Protecting civilians

Humanitarian assistance in occupied territories must comply with international humanitarian law and human rights obligations. These are designed not merely to put food in civilian hands, but to protect the people receiving it. Under these laws, the occupying power bears extensive obligations towards the civilian population. These include ensuring access to essentials such as food and medical supplies, and facilitating humanitarian relief where the population is inadequately supplied. An occupying power can regulate humanitarian operations for legitimate security



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reasons. It can inspect consignments, verify their humanitarian character and take measures to prevent aid being diverted for military purposes.

But those powers have limits.

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From hundreds of aid sites to four

Before the foundation began operating, humanitarian assistance had been distributed through more than 400 UN-coordinated sites across Gaza. The foundation replaced this network with four large distribution sites. Their location was crucial. Civilians south of Wadi Gaza could reach them only using routes that took them through heavily armed Israeli military units and bases. People in northern Gaza faced long journeys. Access was particularly difficult for vulnerable people, including women, children, older people and people with disabilities. Distribution was also unpredictable. At times, civilians received only minutes’ notice that a site was opening. Sometimes those sites would remain open only for very short periods.

Privatising human need

The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation model also relied heavily on private security contractors. Safe Reach Solutions provided security logistics, while UG Solutions secured distribution sites and interacted directly with Palestinians. Some contractors reportedly had little or no humanitarian experience. Contractors were armed, and draft rules of engagement were reportedly provided only after distribution operations had already begun. Private security companies are not automatically incompatible with humanitarian operations. They can, for example, protect civilians, escort aid convoys and secure humanitarian facilities. But the distinction between protecting humanitarian operations and performing military or governmental security func-

tions is important. My research argues activities such as coercive crowd control, intelligence gathering, security screening and the use of force in civilian settings risk crossing that line. Reports that contractors monitored people considered “suspicious”, shared information with the Israeli military and operated alongside facial-recognition surveillance, further blurred the distinction between humanitarian assistance and security operations.

Civilians paid the price

The consequences were serious. Aid distribution points became sites of crowding, stampedes and shootings. Thousands of Palestinians were reported killed or injured around distribution sites and aid routes. Israel disputed casualty figures and maintained live fire near humanitarian centres was prohibited, except in response to an immediate threat to life. Whatever disputes remain about individual incidents, the broader legal question cannot be avoided. A humanitarian system should reduce civilian vulnerability. It should not require hungry civilians to expose themselves repeatedly to foreseeable danger to obtain food.

Outsourcing responsibility

There is another important lesson from the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation experiment. Governments increasingly rely on private companies to perform functions once carried out by states or established humanitarian organisations. But outsourcing a function does not necessarily outsource legal responsibility. Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, an occupying power remains responsible for the treatment of protected civilians by those acting under its authority or control. This means replacing an established humanitarian network with a privately administered system does not remove the occupying power’s underlying obligations to keep civilians safe.

Beyond Gaza

The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation operated for only six months, but its significance may extend much further. The danger is that highly militarised private aid systems become a model for humanitarian assistance in future conflicts and occupations. Humanitarian relief cannot be judged simply by how much food is delivered and distributed. It must also be judged by who can reach that food, what risks they must take to obtain it, whether assistance is distributed according to need, and whether the system protects human dignity and civilian life. When access to food becomes connected to surveillance, forced movement, confinement or exposure to violence, the boundary between humanitarian assistance and military control begins to disappear. This can be incompatible with international humanitarian law, but also with the central reason for relief operations to exist in the first place: to get essential goods to innocent civilians in war zones.

(The writer is an Associate Professor of Law in the School of Business and Law, Australia)

Overnight phone charging is safe, but heat matters

Modern smartphones automatically manage charging, while heat remains the biggest threat

MEENA JHA

IT’s bedtime. You set your alarm, notice your phone is down to 23% battery, plug it in beside the bed and go to sleep. By the morning, it’s been connected to the charger for some seven to eight hours – much longer than it needed to reach 100%, especially if it’s on a fast charger. You may have a vague recollection this could be bad for your phone’s battery. The chemistry that makes lithium-ion batteries rechargeable has a limited shelf life, and it’s shortened by repeated charge–discharge cycles.

In the past, the advice has been simple: don’t leave your phone charging overnight and avoid bringing the battery up to 100% to preserve its lifespan, ideally keeping it between 20% and 80%. In principle, that advice is still sound because the fundamental chemistry of the battery inside your phone hasn’t changed. Regularly draining it to 0% and then filling it up to 100% will shorten its lifespan. However, modern phones have improved battery health management and charging controls. As a result, the answer to whether it’s okay to leave your phone plugged in overnight has become more nuanced in recent years.

Better charging controls

Rather than simply telling people not to charge overnight, modern phones can increasingly manage what happens to the battery during those nighttime hours. Apple has offered optimised battery charging since 2019. This feature learns a user’s daily charging routine and delays charging beyond a certain percentage when the phone is expected to remain connected for an extended period.

Samsung and Google Pixel phones both offer a similar feature. Pixel phones have “adaptive charging” which also learns charging habits and slows charging over-



night, aiming to reach 100% shortly before you normally unplug the phone.

Samsung phones have “sleep time protection” which stops charging at about 80% while you sleep and adjusts charging to reach 100% just before you wake.

With the new iPhone 17, Apple has also introduced adaptive power mode, which learns typical battery consumption and anticipates when the user might run low, then adjusts power use to help the battery last through the day.

Setting charging limits

So what about charging only to 80%? Reducing time spent at a high state of charge can help manage battery wear. But manufacturers themselves no longer treat 80% as the only choice. Samsung allows users of their most recent phones to set up battery protection that caps charging at a percentage of their choice: 80%, 85%, 90% or 95%.

Apple’s iPhone 15 and later have a similar feature, allowing users to choose between 80% and 100% in 5% increments. The phone can even recommend a particular limit based on the user’s charging habits. Instead of using adaptive charging, Google Pixel 6a and later devices can simply be set to a limit of 80%, an option that’s ideal for people who usually finish their day with some charge remaining.

Ultimately, not charging your phone fully is a trade-off between reducing battery wear over the longer term and having more charge available day-to-day. If 80% comfortably gets you through the day, a lower limit will make sense. If you’re travelling or facing a long day away from a charger, you may want to use more of the battery’s capac-

ity. Even if you do choose a lower charging limit, your phone may occasionally charge itself to 100% so that the device’s battery readings remain correct.

Whatever you do, avoid heat

While all these new charging features can prolong the life of the battery, they don’t really address another important factor: heat. The chemicals in lithium-ion batteries are sensitive to high temperatures and will degrade over time if stored in hot conditions, especially if they’re also being charged at the same time. Phones themselves increasingly respond to heat too, with charging limitations kicking in when the device detects high temperatures. The general advice here hasn’t changed. Always keep your phone away from excessive heat, including leaving it in a hot car or in direct sunlight. If charging at bedtime, make sure you’re not tucking your phone under a pillow or other bedding which could trap heat and risk overheating the device.

So, can you charge your phone overnight?

For most people using a modern smartphone, the answer is yes. The phone manages charging automatically, and you don’t need to wake in the middle of the night to unplug your phone at exactly 80%. Instead, check what your phone offers and use optimised, adaptive or sleep-aware charging if it suits your routine. Consider a lower charge limit if you don’t need 100% every day. Above all, avoid excessive heat. Even though phone batteries still aren’t immune to ageing, we now have more options to try and prolong their life with smart charging features – so it’s a good idea to check your settings and let the technology do some of the work.

(The writer is a computer science and IT researcher at Central Queensland University, Australia)

Multilateralism under siege as world leaders seek stronger UN

Leaders from more than 150 countries call for stronger cooperation on challenges no nation can tackle alone

TED ANTHONY
NEW YORK

THERE is doom. There is gloom. There is mistrust. There is insistence upon shared power and the prevention of political and military bullying. And there is a growing cry for permanent seats at the table of power – for island nations threatened by climate change and, more than anything, for Africa.

These things have often been true in recent years when world leaders orate at one another during their annual meeting at the UN General Assembly, which concluded Monday. This year, though, the discourse seemed even more urgent than usual. Across the words of more than 150 speeches, two things emerged as clear: Many leaders deeply want the world body to work. And many have concluded that it isn’t. “Where are the United Nations?” Alexandra Hill Tinoco, the foreign minister of El Salvador, asked Monday. “Do we have an organization that is still relevant?”

That was the question that hung over the weeklong gathering as leader after world leader – in different words, with different details – probed at the very heart of the organization that was founded eight decades ago to prevent a conflict like World War II from ever happening again.

At the heart of the UN ethos sits a word that most regular people never use: “multilateralism.” The optimistic principle – that problems that cross borders, regions and oceans can be solved by cooperation and shared power – is a potent one, advocated by almost everyone (the United States under Donald Trump being a notable exception).

But that flavour of multilateralism was conceived and built in a different era, when globalized challenges like pandemics, climate change and artificial intelligence did not sit quite so front and center. Even today, those that hold the true power – the ability to veto anything that comes before the UN Security Council without giving a reason – are the same five nations given it at the end of World War II.



A file photo of UN meeting

“Multilateralism is under siege,” said Mulipola Anarosa Ale-Molioʻo, Samoa’s deputy prime minister. It’s not surprising, then, that the theme of this year’s leaders’ meeting at the General Assembly was “restoring trust.” From the barrage of remarks about it being broken, it seemed obvious that something needs to give in order to, as Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf put it, create “a shared home rather than an organization held hostage to the dominance of power politics.”

“There are problems,” said the foreign minister of Sri Lanka, Vijitha Herath, “which no country can solve alone.” There’s a close relationship between multilateralism and trust. One sticking point that the scores of speeches revealed was the scratchiness between two vital notions – multilateralism

and sovereignty. Nations from North Korea to the Marshall Islands invoked high principles to say that all must work together while simultaneously underscoring that they will never allow their sovereign rights to be violated. This produces contradictions that remain unsolved. “We have never been so connected, yet we are increasingly unable to trust one another,” said Grand Duke Guillaume, Luxembourg’s head of state. The tradition of American individualism plays a role here, as embodied by Trump’s consistently aggressive tone toward the UN. To many in the United States, multilateralism hints at dark echoes of “one world government” and the notion of giving up power – and thus liberty – to other stakeholders. This trait, while often recessive in UN meetings, is true of many nations that fear incursion, war and domination.

In reality, though, multilateralism is the way the world works today – economically and, arguably, politically. From AI to rising temperatures, many nations just aren’t equipped to go it alone. And while cooperation on AI was a centerpiece this year, so too was the outlook that nations such as China offered – that each country must make its own decisions about the emerging

technology. “States alone cannot make progress,” said Christophe Mirmand, Monaco’s minister of state.

The hue and cry for multilateralism, always present when smaller nations meet larger ones, has been growing since the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21, when most of the meetings were held remotely. It has been amplified further as members – particularly island nations, whose very existence is threatened by warming oceans – increasingly assert that the world is happening at them rather than with them.

If bigger countries with different interests can make all the major decisions on problems and opportunities that transcend map borders, these smaller nations say, then they will be left in the dust. The only answer, they say, is a United Nations that truly equalizes voices and has the fortitude to make that principle stick. “The message to small nations is clear: Be as sovereign as we allow you to be,” said Philip Edward Davis, prime minister of the Bahamas. “A sovereignty that requires permission is not a sovereignty.”

Fixing the imbalance of political oomph is difficult

Whenever the United Nations gathers, its origin story is always lurking in the background: World War II. Nowhere is that more evident than when talk of expanding the Security Council and its permanent members comes up. The 15-member Security Council, which holds the UN’s only real authority, has five permanent members – the United States, Russia, Britain, China and France – that hold veto power. While other nations rotate in and out, their power is limited; they can neither veto nor prevent vetoes.