



What Are the Prospects for a Global Treaty on Critical Raw Materials?

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Summary

How can international collaboration emerge in an issue area dominated by strategic rivalry and resource nationalism? The global demand for critical raw materials (CRMs) such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements is increasing with global investments in clean energy and advanced technologies. This demand has intensified strategic competition, with major powers framing CRMs as national security assets and adopting unilateral measures such as export controls and bloc-based alliances. These geopolitical tensions risk sidelining concerns over the negative environmental and social impacts caused by mining operations. Amidst these heightened tensions, Colombia has proposed to initiate negotiations for a global treaty on mineral and metals, scheduled for discussion at the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-7) in December 2025. Colombia's draft resolution calls for the establishment of an expert group to explore options for a legally binding agreement modelled on the plastic treaty process. It aims to address environmental degradation, human rights violations, and governance gaps in existing CRM supply chains before demand pressure escalates these concerns even further. While the prospects for Colombia's proposal remain highly uncertain, it could mark an important milestone for advancing international cooperation around sustainable CRM governance.



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Introduction

How can international collaboration emerge in an issue area dominated by strategic rivalry and resource nationalism? This policy brief examines Colombia's proposal to initiate negotiations for a global treaty on mineral and metals, which is scheduled to be discussed at the seventh session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-7), in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2025. The initiative brings attention to the severe environmental and human rights risks associated with the escalating demand for critical raw materials (CRMs), as major powers race to secure supply chains through export controls, investment restrictions, and bloc-based alliances. In a context where CRMs are increasingly framed as national security assets, the proposal signals an effort to move beyond unilateral strategies towards a cooperative framework for achieving sustainable governance of minerals and metals. This policy brief explores the prospects and obstacles facing this initiative, and the implications of such a treaty for balancing security concerns with environmental and social impacts associated with CRM supply chains.

Policy debates on CRMs are increasingly dominated by national security concerns and geopolitical tension. CRM resources are vital for clean energy transitions and advanced technologies, and access to minerals such as lithium, cobalt and rare earth elements has become a strategic imperative for governments. For example, the US under President Trump has pursued multiple bilateral deals to ensure supply, and China has added minerals and processing

equipment to its export control list. At the same time, resource-rich countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America, face significant environmental and social costs directly related to the increased demand for CRM¹.

Wider concerns related to sustainability and human rights may run the risk of being overshadowed, as major powers prioritize strategic control of CRMs. Despite the growing securitization of CRMs, however, international collaboration remains possible. There are several ongoing initiatives aiming to mitigate the negative social and environmental impacts associated with mining, a critical part of the CRM life cycle. A broad range of voluntary frameworks involving civil society and industry actors have emerged, focusing on both transparency and reporting. UN-led efforts, most notably the Working Group on Transforming the Extractive Industries for Sustainable Development, are advancing reporting requirements and standards in this area, signalling that cooperative governance on CRM can emerge despite international strategic competition.

Against this backdrop, the Colombian initiative stands out as the most recent expression of collaborative intent and resource diplomacy that merits closer examination.

Advancing a Global Treaty on Minerals and Metals

Colombia's draft proposal specifically calls for the establishment of an expert group to explore options for a legally binding



agreement on minerals and metals.² Colombia suggests modelling the negotiation process on the plastic treaty talks,³ and while the proposal faces major obstacles, it elevates CRM governance on the international political agenda and signals growing recognition of severe impacts on the environment and people throughout the CRM lifecycle.

Advancing the proposal depends heavily on the support of major powers, including key players such as China, which is approaching a 50% global market share of CRM processing by 2030⁴. Currently, such support is lacking, as was recently demonstrated when China, during the negotiations on a just transition plan away from fossil fuels at COP30 under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), blocked the inclusion of text on the social and environmental risks associated with CRM extraction and processing⁵.

The prospects that Colombia's proposal will result in an international treaty thus remain rather slim so long as major powers are opposed. Colombia's efforts for a multilateral treaty also stand in stark contrast to recent, unilateral strategies and bloc-based competition, which has characterized CRM governance thus far.

The Governance Landscape on Critical Raw Materials

CRM governance is, however, not an entirely new phenomenon, and Colombia's push for a binding treaty is but one example of recent efforts to enhance international cooperation

in this area. In recent decades, numerous international initiatives have arisen.

Most initiatives from international organizations are voluntary and normative, offering guidance rather than enforceable obligations⁶, and often include environmental, social, and governance (ESG) elements. For example, the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has teams focusing specifically on raw materials extraction and ESG implementation. The United Nations Framework Classification for Resources (UNFC), adopted in 1997 and revised as recently as 2019, provides a principles-based system for assessing resource extraction projects' socioeconomic and technical viability⁷. Building on this, the United Nations Resource Management System (UNRMS), also established by the UNECE, was introduced in 2017 to offer voluntary global standards and guidelines for the management of resource projects⁸.

Other initiatives are more regulatory in character. The European Union's Critical Raw Materials Act (ECRMA) marked the first EU regulation specifically targeting CRMs. The ECRMA is, however, first and foremost a collection of policy instruments aimed at securing CRM supply to the Union, and it notably lacks the inclusion of ESG elements⁹. Its regulatory content includes modifications to the permitting process of mineral extraction projects and obligations on member states to collect information on domestic strategic resources. The act also set out new EU-wide goals for within-EU extraction (10% of consumption), processing (40%), and recycling (25%), as well as limiting reliance from any one single non-EU country



and material (65%)¹⁰. Notably, the ECRMA uses the UNFC as its reporting mechanism¹¹.

In addition, a myriad of NGO-led and voluntary initiatives has emerged in an attempt to curb environmental and social harm from mining. Today, more than one hundred voluntary mining standards exist worldwide¹². Their scope, uptake, monitoring procedures, and organizational structures vary considerably. Prominent examples include the Global Industry Standard on Tailings Management, the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance, and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. These initiatives focus mainly on regulating the extractive industries and on enhancing accountability through enhanced reporting and transparency requirements.

In spite of these efforts, there is no binding international agreement on CRMs. This creates major regulatory gaps, as standards vary significantly across countries and regions. This means that extractive industries in different contexts are subject to different obligations and expectations regarding ESG principles, leading to substantial inconsistencies in the sector's commitment to responsible practices. In practice, this can have severe implications for both the environment and human well-being¹³. Securing global sustainable and equitable supply chains thus ultimately depends on collective action, and these existing international initiatives and guidelines may

serve as important building blocks for the future governance of CRM.

Aligning Global Interests on Critical Raw Materials

Despite the intransigence of some global powers, countries have shown interest in international cooperation on CRM governance in recent years. In 2020 and 2021, a series of high-level UN roundtables, coordinated by the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) and the Regional Economic Commissions, were held on extractive industries and sustainable development. This led to the establishment of the Working Groupⁱ on Transforming Extractive Industries for Sustainable Development ('the Working Group') in 2022¹⁴. The aim of the Working Group is to coordinate UN initiatives on resource extraction, consolidate best practices, and support policy implementation and coordination¹⁵.

In 2024, the Working Group convened an expert panel to identify common principles for states, corporations and civil society to guide extractive industries towards sustainable practices¹⁶. After four months of deliberation, the panel published its report 'Principles to Guide Critical Energy Transition Materials Towards Equity and Justice' in September 2024¹⁷. The report was praised for its inclusivity of indigenous people¹⁸ but was also critiqued for relying on weak

ⁱ Members of the Working Group include the UN Regional Economic Commissions, the United Nations Environment Programme, UN Trade and Development, and the United Nations Development Programme, who chair the group on a rotating basis.

Other members include the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, International Labour Organization,

the International Trade Centre, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sustainable Energy for All, the United Nations Youth Office, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the World Trade Organization.



standards¹⁹. Nevertheless, its recommendations have already been integrated into UN agency operations, including, for example, the UN Industrial Development Organization²⁰.

Indeed, several of these recommendations have informed Colombia's recent efforts. Drawing on the panel's work, Colombia, with support from Brazil, put forward a joint voluntary proposal at COP16 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), held in Cali, Colombia, in 2024. The proposal called on COP16 to set up an intergovernmental and multistakeholder group to design a traceability and accountability framework for CRM²¹. Colombia also made efforts to advance the issue during the COP30 negotiations in November 2025. At COP30, Colombia proposed language on extraction-related risks, through the Group of 77 on a just transition plan away from fossil fuels but these attempts were reportedly blocked by China and not included in the final text²². Colombia's draft resolution to UNEA-7 might be met by similar opposition from major powers. This draft resolution does not, however, mark the UNEA's first engagement with CRM governance. Since 2019, the assembly has adopted three resolutions focusing on aligning CRM governance with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, encouraging governments and corporations to incorporate ESG principles and calling on countries to engage in international collaboration around CRM²³. While UNEA resolutions are not legally binding, these recent developments at least signal that there are many governments that are interested in advancing cooperation in this area.

Why Colombia Matters

The Colombian pursuit of an international agreement reflects both the complexity and the potential of an international treaty. Elevating the issue to the UN agenda is significant given the country's economic prospects tied to resource extraction. Geological surveys indicate substantial reserves of critical minerals in the country, with cobalt showing the largest prospective area²⁴. The global CRM market is currently valued at more than USD 325 billion and is forecast to double in size by 2040²⁵. If exploited and coupled with investment in processing capacity, these resources could therefore potentially generate considerable national revenue.

Simultaneously, the government has close ties to civil society and is progressive in terms of ESG issues across the board. President Gustavo Petro was elected in 2022 on a platform to phase out coal and oil dependence and has advanced a progressive environmental political agenda²⁶. With elections approaching in 2026, the government may have additional incentives to champion policies that are important to its constituencies. The role of civil society is especially important for understanding Colombia's push for an international treaty to manage mining impacts, as Colombia has historically been plagued by both conflict and the prevalence of illegal extraction practices, which have had adverse social and environmental impacts²⁷. However, the domestic views on mining are not without tension. Restrictions on extraction activities have sparked debate among industry



stakeholders over the balance between economic opportunity and sustainability²⁸. Colombia's concerns are also emblematic of broader ESG challenges prevalent across mining operations. For instance, mining evaluation initiatives such as the responsible mining index have shown that more than 90% of the 250 mining sites evaluated worldwide achieve less than 20% compliance with the ESG indicators assessed²⁹, a strong signal that current governance initiatives are unfit to properly address these challenges.

By promoting sustainable mining practices and, when necessary, foregoing immediate economic gains by restraining domestic opportunities to develop the extraction of CRM, Colombia offers a compelling case for responsible resource stewardship. Such an approach, which avoids the pursuit of short-term market dominance in favour of long-term environmental and social considerations, has the potential to inspire broader international dialogue and catalyse the development of a binding global agreement on sustainable mineral extraction.

Key Takeaways

In the current geopolitical climate, CRM is highly securitized, as states strive to secure stable supplies while managing dependency risks. Against this backdrop, Colombia's proposal stands out as an effort to counterbalance securitization with social and environmental priorities. Such actions may help reframe CRM debates from a narrow security lens towards a broader agenda encompassing environmental, economic development, inclusion, and social justice concerns. This reframing could serve as an

entry point for developing new governance approaches, intended to address environmental harm and exploitation patterns associated with unrestrained extraction and intensifying competition.

Two factors make Colombia's efforts particularly significant. First, the UN Secretary-General's Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals brought together governments, civil society, and industry to develop principles and actionable recommendations. These principles are now widely referenced and have laid the foundation for more concrete discussions on how to ensure that practices that consider both the environment and people are upheld throughout the CRM lifecycle.

Second, Colombia's position as a resource-rich country, choosing not to engage in intense competition for market shares and the exploitation of national resources, signals leadership. Leadership has also been a crucial component in other international treaty negotiations, including the process of the Minamata Convention on Mercury³⁰. The country may thus inspire others to adopt similar approaches and could develop the momentum and new alliances needed to push more firmly for human-centred and sustainable practices in CRM governance.

Treaty formation is however inherently complex and shaped by mandates, issue areas, and alignment with existing agreements³¹. This process is still in its infancy, and it is impossible to accurately assess where it will go from here. Progress depends on states' ability to unite around shared goals and values. In this context, principles from the UN Secretary-General's



panel could provide a foundation for future agreements, potentially paving the way for treaty formation. Colombia's efforts to advance these principles at the upcoming UNEA may mark important first steps in shaping global CRM governance. The dialogue may also accelerate further in other fora, such as the April 2026 conference on the transition away from fossil fuels in Santa Marta, Colombia, which is co-organized with the Netherlands, and where critical minerals are likely to feature on the agenda³².

As the economics of CRM extraction and processing currently see mountainous growth, states and corporations may just as likely ignore voluntary standards and oppose any international nonbinding agreement that could hinder growth and rather attempt to catapult themselves up the economic ladder. Nevertheless, more stringent expectations on ESG and new enforceable mechanisms may not be out of the question if, through efforts such as Colombia's, the global collective is continuously reminded of the great risks to people and the environment that unhindered extraction and competition entail.

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