WHY HAVE INTERNATIONAL LAW?

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WHY HAVE INTERNATIONAL LAW?

INTRODUCTION

International law governs the relationships between sovereign nations. Comprised of treaties, conventions, customary law, general principles and judicial decisions, it outlines the obligations and duties states owe to each other and their citizens[1].

International law exists to foster and maintain co-operative inter-state relationships in the pursuit of common global interests. It describes a collaborative approach to safeguarding human rights, resolving conflicts, ensuring justice through criminal accountability, encouraging fair economic trade, growth and stability, and protecting our shared environment. However, I suggest greater depth lies within the commonalities, connections, and intricacies of the fields that fall under the purview of 'international law'.

This essay will explore the aspirational nature of international law, analysing its value and efficacy by examining multiple sources, providing references and reflections on the teachings of Guru Nanak and Sikh jurisprudence, ultimately offering evidence-based insight to answer the question '*why have international law?*'.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

Human beings have always relied upon community to survive. We are bound through common biological, historic, and social roots. The Code of Ur-Nammu[2], considered one of the oldest written legal codes, provides an early example of how community bonds reflect principles of justice, fairness, inclusivity and accountability. Similarly, the Rehat Maryada emphasises the communal need for accountability, requiring reparation for wrongdoing

[1]Statute of the International Court of Justice (Adopted 18 April 1946, Entered into Force 24 October 1946) Chapter 2, Article 38, pp.95.

[2] Circa 2100-2050 BCE. Joshua, J. Mark 'Code of Ur-Nammu' [2026] World History Encyclopaedia.

through service-based punishment that benefits the community, serving as a reminder of unity[3].

These views demonstrate the fundamental human need for connection and community, living in service to each other for the protection and preservation of all. International Human Rights Law (IHRL) reflects this desire and extends it beyond national borders, into the wider global community.

During the mid-20th century, the world saw the effects of unchecked fascist regimes through the atrocities perpetrated against communities and individuals alike. This barbarism highlighted the need for international protection and ignited a moral shift within the international community. Their response was to establish a global standard grounded in dignity. A notable example is the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights[4], which reflects many of the core rights and freedoms originally stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[5]. As an international treaty, it imposes enforceable duties upon states and resolves the inherent jurisdictional limits of the European Convention on Human Rights[6].

Founded upon universality, indivisibility and interdependence, these principles are reflected in historical tradition and in the teachings of Guru Nanak. A fierce advocate of human rights, he rejected the idea of a social hierarchy, teaching universality and morality, and honouring the Divine through community. He championed equality, emphasising the innate kinship of

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[3] Sikh Rehat Maryada, 1945/2026, *Method of Imposing Chastisement, Article XXV (C),* pp. 58.

[4] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Adopted 16 December 1976, Entered into Force 23 March 1976).

[5] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Adopted on 10 December 1948).

[6] The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Adopted on 4 November 1950, Entered into Force on 3 September 1953).

the divine light that resides within us all, saying, *'The God-conscious being is always unstained, like the sun, which gives its comfort and warmth to all. The God-conscious being looks upon all alike, like the wind, which blows equally upon the king and the poor beggar*[7]*'.*

Herein lies the importance of IHRL. Specifying inalienable rights, freedoms, and protections clarifies the state's obligations towards its citizens. This results in a quantifiable legal responsibility against which state conduct can be judged.

It is the fallibility of individual states that has increased the need for external accountability. Most nations have ratified some form of IHRL[8], evidencing a global consensus on its necessity and impact. However, that does not remove the potential for human rights violations. This is evidenced by a recent case brought before the European Court of Human Rights[9] (ECtHR), following the killing of a Roma man by state agents in the Czech Republic. The Court found breaches of Articles 2[10], 3,[11] and 14[12] of the Convention[13] and exposed instances of institutional racism, systemic failures, and ineffective state investigations. The Court made a reparative order for €20,000 in non-pecuniary damages payable to the family.

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[7] Guru Granth Sahib, pp. 272

[8] All 193 UN member states are signatories to at least one human rights treaty. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Report 2025, (2519404 E, May 2025).

[9] *S.T, v The Czech Republic* (2026) 1 DE 23904, Application No. 28273/23.

[10] The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Adopted on 4 November 1950, Entered into Force on 3 September 1953) *Article 2 – the rights to life.*

[11] The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Adopted on 4 November 1950, Entered into Force on 3 September 1953) *Article 3 – the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment.*

[12] The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Adopted on 4 November 1950, Entered into Force on 3 September 1953) *Article 14 – the prohibition of discrimination.*

[13] No.6.

The decision upheld the states' obligation to safeguard their citizens and reinforced the need for international oversight to ensure accountability when domestic mechanisms fail.

Much like domestic law, IHRL is not without its limitations. International law relies heavily upon the consent and compliance of independent states. However, attempts to respect and maintain national sovereignty often result in jurisdictional limits and a lack of enforcement, creating a power imbalance between states. The situation in South Sudan[14], where governmental corruption and selective compliance have been central to human rights abuses, has shown how states may exploit this imbalance to diminish the public appearance of systemic abuses under the guise of national sovereignty.

Furthermore, while institutions exist to provide accountability and justice for victims, significant barriers remain to accessing international mechanisms. Before an application can be made to the ECtHR[15], all domestic legal remedies must be exhausted, thereby delaying justice and granting states time to suppress information, distract from breaches or perpetrate further abuses.

While not infallible, IHRL reflects those it seeks to serve. Its weaknesses do not negate its tangible impact. Instead, they demonstrate exactly why international law and accountability are necessary. Humanity cannot be left entirely to individual discretion; it requires

[14] South Sudan, government corruption fuels human rights crisis 'Government corruption fuels human rights crisis in South Sudan, independent panel finds' (*United Nations,* 2025) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165862> Accessed 1 August 2026.

[15] Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as amended by Protocols Nos. 11, 14 and 15, supplement by Protocols Nos. 1, 4, 6, 7, 12, 13 and 16 (2021) *Article 35. 1, Admissibility Criteria,* pp. 21.

community. IHRL represents a collective responsibility to protect one another and ensure safety and security for all.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Influenced by International Human Rights Law (IHRL), International Humanitarian Law (IHL) seeks to protect life and dignity by governing military conduct during armed conflict. Much like honour codes such as chivalry, or religious duties such as the *Dharma Yudh*[16] or the principle of *Jus in Bello*[17], IHL attempts to balance the realities of war with the need for humanitarian protection. Without IHL, technological and military developments would only increase the human cost of war.

The development of IHL is well documented. Before the First World War, there were the original Geneva[18] and Hague Conventions[19]. However, World War I exposed significant gaps, demonstrating the need for tighter regulations on warfare. This resulted in new protocols to prohibit the use of advanced weaponry[20] and prescribe a basic standard of treatment for prisoners of war[21]. However, this proved insufficient. In 1939, the world was plunged into a

[16] 'Sikh, Sant-Sipahi & Dharam-Yudh, Understanding the martial dimension of Sikh identity and practice' *(Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ)* 2026) <https://gnnsj.org/sikh-dharam/sikh-learner-practitioner/sant-sipahi-and-dharam-yudh/> Accessed 24 May 2026.

[17] 'What are jus ad bellum and jus in bello?' *(International Committee of the Red Cross,* 2015) <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-are-jus-ad-bellum-and-jus-bello-0> Accessed 7 August 2026).

[18] Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, Geneva, 22 August 1864.

[19] Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Law and Customs of War on Land, The Hague, 29 July 1899.
Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Law, The Hague,18 October 1907.

[20] Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, 17 June 1925.

[21] Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 27 July 1929.

Second World War. The same atrocities that paved the way for modern IHRL refocused the scope of the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and reinforced the necessity to prioritise humanity (IHL). In 1949, 4 new, revised, and expanded Geneva Conventions established protections for the treatment of soldiers on land[22] and at sea[23], the humane treatment and rights of prisoners of war[24], and the protection of civilians, including those within occupied territories[25].

The importance of IHL is neatly captured by a single catchphrase associated with the Shoah: 'Never Again'[26]. IHL reflects the international community's dedication to answer the global plea for protection and to prevent systemic abuses and the perpetration of further atrocities.

The value of IHL is evident. It attempts to strike a balance between military necessity, morality and humanity during war. In many ways, this reflects the ideals of Sant-Sipahi[27]. While they accepted the situational necessity of war, they refused to compromise their morality. They channelled their devotion to God through the active pursuit of justice,

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[22] The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field (Adopted on 12 August 1949, Entered into Force on 21 October 1950).

[23] The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea (Adopted on 12 August 1949, Entered into Force on 21 October 1950).

[24] Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Adopted on 12 August 1949, Entered into Force on 21 October 1950).

[25] Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Adopted on 12 August 1949, Entered into Force on 21 October 1950).

[26] 'Combating Antisemitism: The Never Again Association's Enduring Battle' *(International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance,* 3 May 2024) <https://holocaustremembrance.com/news/combating-antisemitism-never-again-association> Accessed 9th August 2026.

[27]Saint-Soldiers established by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind. They reflect the Gurus doctrine of Miri Piri, or dual authority. It combines their spiritual devotion with their responsibility to uphold justice and protect the vulnerable. No.18.

challenging social inequalities, empowering the oppressed, and adhering to a strict moral code that forbids harming civilians[28].

The variability and inconsistency of war necessitate fluidity within IHL, often prescribing subjective tests grounded in vague, ambiguous language. Concepts such as ‘proportionality’ permit incidental civilian deaths when proportionate to the proposed military gain. This idea of ‘acceptable losses’ exposes a moral and ethical conundrum, resulting in the dehumanisation of the individual and suggesting a comparable value between human life and tactical objectives. Uncertainty about what constitutes ‘proportionate’ may lead to inconsistent implementation based on arbitrary interpretations. States may exploit these uncertainties to justify otherwise unlawful conduct as unavoidable in the ‘fog of war’.

Without centralised enforcement to oversee implementation, IHL relies heavily on state compliance. Inconsistent implementation leads to inconsistent results.
In 2022, following applications from Ukraine and the Netherlands, the European Court of Human Rights[29] documented systemic violations of IHL and IHRL relating to Russia’s escalating war efforts. This included legal accountability for the actions of pro-Russian separatist armed groups in occupied territories within eastern Ukraine, responsibility for the deaths of 298 people following the downing of Flight MH17 in July 2014 and instances of inhumane treatment through the active obstruction of international investigations. The Court’s decision set a clear precedent regarding international accountability, showcasing the

[28] No. 18.

[29] *Case of Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* (2022) 1 DE 1, Applications Nos. 8019/16, 43800/14, 28525/20 and 11055/22.

impact of IHL enforcement mechanisms and reinforcing that the legal duty states owe extends beyond the jurisdictional limits of their own borders.

However, IHL violations continue, including reports of ongoing use of White Phosphorus against the civilian population in Lebanon[30], in direct contravention of protocols that restrict the use of incendiary weapons against civilians or civilian objects[31],

Despite its imperfections, the persistent nature of armed conflict necessitates IHL. It turns moral duty into legal obligation. It is a last stand against tyranny, a call for accountability, a limit upon violence and a standard for humanity at its most vulnerable. War may be unavoidable, but that does not justify unlimited or unanswered warfare.

INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW

Law without power is merely advice. For law to be truly effective, it must be enforceable. In the absence of centralised enforcement, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) relies on International Criminal Law (ICL) mechanisms to prosecute violations.

However, the scope of ICL extends beyond IHL. Often described as a court of last resort[32], the International Criminal Court (ICC) intervenes in cases that are otherwise unsuitable for domestic prosecution due to unwillingness, inability, or immunity[33]. Established by the Rome

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30 'Lebanon: Urgent call to protect civilians as death toll mounts following brutal escalation in Israeli Attacks' *(Amnesty International,* 8 April 2026) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/04/lebanon-urgent-call-to-protect-civilians-as-death-toll-mounts-following-brutal-escalation-in-israeli-attacks/> Accessed 1 August 2026.

31 Protocol on the Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Incendiary Weapons (Protocol III), (Adopted on 10 October 1980, Entered into Force on 2 December 1983).

32 'International Criminal Court' (Human Rights WaTch. 2026) <https://www.hrw.org/topic/international-justice/international-criminal-court> Accessed 4 August 2026).

33 Inability due to a lack of infrastructure, functional courts or enforcement agencies. Immunity gaps because of legislation, corruption, personal and functional immunity and inviolability, preventing the prosecution of heads of state and other state officials.

Statute[34], its jurisdiction is limited to 4 extreme atrocities: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression[35]. The importance of ICL lies in its capacity to investigate and prosecute these offences.

Embodying many of the core teachings of Guru Nanak, including righteous moral order (*Dharam*), Divine judgment (*Niau*), and the absolute unity and equality of humanity (*Ik Onkar*)[36], ICL seeks to end impunity, establish individual criminal responsibility, and ensure justice for victims.

The development of an international approach to crime is subject to some debate. While there are suggestions which link it to the Treaty of Versailles[37], particularly Article 227[38], there is a strong consensus that its foundations lie in the Nuremberg Principles[39], introduced by the UN General Assembly following the prosecution of political, military and economic leaders at the Nuremberg[40] trials. The tribunal rejected the superior orders defence and set a new precedent that individuals could be held personally liable for offences committed under state authority.

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34 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Adopted on 17 July 1998, Entered into Force on 1 July 2002).

35 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Adopted on 17 July 1998, Entered into Force on 1 July 2002) *Article 5 Crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court,* pp. 3.

36 'Sikhism and restorative justice: Theory and practice' *(Restorative Justice Exchange,* Pashaura Singh, 2015) <https://restorativejustice.org/rj-archive/sikhism-and-restorative-justice-theory-and-practice/> Accessed 1 August 2026.

37 Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany (Adopted on 28 June 1919, Entered into Force on 10 January 1920).

38 It called for the public arraignment of William II of Hohenzollerm, formerly German Emperor for a supreme offence against international morality and the sanctity of treaties, and the creation of a special international tribunal to try him. No. 38. *Part VII. Penalties. Article 227.*

39 A set of seven guideline, defining international crimes, derived from actions taken during the Second World War. Principles of International Law Recognised in the Charter of the Nürnberg Tribunal and in the Judgement of the Tribunal (Adopted on 11 December 1946, Entered into Force July 1950).

40 The International Military Tribunal (IMT) 20 November 1945 – 1 October 1946, and The Trials of War Criminal Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals (NMT) December 1946 – April 1949.

ICL continues to demonstrate the need for personal criminal liability. In 2024, the ICC convicted Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz[41] of crimes against humanity, including torture, persecution, and other inhumane acts. Due to their appalling nature, human rights abuses and IHL violations are often sanitised and anonymised to the comfort of the public. ICL seeks to empower victims through active participation. The prosecution relied upon Article 68(3) of the Statute[42] to call 52 oral witnesses before the tribunal. This is the true value of ICL to victims. Hearing first-hand accounts from victims provides recognition and validation of their lived experience. It enables both the ICC and the global community to appreciate the physical, emotional and psychological toll.

Aziz was ultimately sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, and reparative processes have commenced. As the first conviction for offences committed during the occupation in Timbuktu, it sets a significant precedent for victims and provides opportunities for further international investigations.

This potential, however, is stifled by the reliance upon state compliance. Again, this emphasises how national sovereignty and a lack of centralised enforcement act as a barrier to justice. Selective compliance with ICL mechanisms, such as ICC warrants, showcases a worrying imbalance between those who have, for whom the threat of sanctions elicits little fear, and those who have not. Often perceived as a threat, the focus on heads of state and high-ranking government officials accentuates the divide between states, unintentionally

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41 'About the Court' *(International Criminal Court,* 2026) <https://www.icc-cpi.int/about/the-court> Accessed 1 August 2026.

42 Article 68(3) grants victims and witnesses the right to present their views and concerns to the tribunal. No. 34. *Article 68(3), Protection of the victims and witnesses and their participation in the proceedings,* pp. 48.

causing conflict, destabilising peace and undermining international relations. The issuance of an ICC warrant for Benjamin Netanyahu in 2024[43] has clearly evidenced this. Reports indicate that since its issuance, Netanyahu has crossed through multiple ICL signatory states; however, no efforts have been made to produce him before the ICC[44]. It has been suggested that this passivity is the result of economic self-interest, where the potential gain far outweighs the moral and legal obligations of states to enforce ICL[45].

While this may appear to undermine the efficacy of ICL, much like IHL, it does not diminish its value. It is an international response to the pervasive nature of violence. It offers clarity by setting precise legal definitions for crimes of international concern. Imposing direct liability on individuals reduces the abstract nature of these abuses and violations. Prosecuting those who plan, order or facilitate criminal acts deters potential perpetrators. It endows victims with a renewed sense of self, facilitating participation, reparation and official recognition on a global scale. Despite the stifling effect, as a complementary system, it safeguards sovereignty by intervening only when domestic remedies fail. Ultimately, it sends a strong message that these acts cannot and will not be tolerated, emphasising the importance of global justice.

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC & TRADE LAW

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[43] International Criminal Court, *Netanyahu*, 21 November 2024.

[44] 'EU reiterates ICC cooperation obligation as Netanyahu again crosses airspace of member states' (*Middle East Monitor*, 28 July 2026) <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260728-eu-reiterates-icc-cooperation-obligation-as-netanyahu-again-crosses-airspace-of-member-states/> Accessed 7 August 2026.

[45] 'Western nations' moves still fall short of real pressure on Israel, but there are more options' (*ABC News,* 12 August 2025) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-12/palestinian-statehood-benjamin-netanyahu-analysis/105640700> Accessed 5 August 2026).

The mere existence of international law demonstrates how the actions of one country can have serious consequences for the wider global community. It underscores the need for external oversight to maintain co-operative inter-state relationships. International Economic and Trade Law (IETL) is no exception. Designed to regulate cross-border trade, investment, and finance, IETL aims to prevent trade wars, resolve disputes and set global standards to maintain economic stability. Established by the Marrakesh Agreement[46], the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is the primary international body that manages the rules of international trade.

This oversight is vital because the effects of international trade extend beyond state infrastructure. This is made clear by the effects of the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz[47]. Resource shortages have led to higher living costs, causing economic strain on individuals. In Guru Nanak's teachings, he emphasised the impact of equitable distribution, inspiring individuals to place others' needs above their own, to support the welfare of all (*Sarbat da Bhala[48])* and share their wealth, food, and resources (*Vand Chakko*[49]).
This commitment to equality is not exclusive to Sikhism. It is evidenced within IETL by principles such as the *Most-Favoured-Nation* (MFN) clause. This promotes non-discrimination, fairness, stability, and predictability by requiring states to treat all WTO

[46] Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organisation (15 April 1994).

[47] Strait of Hormuz Disruptions – Implications for Global Trade and Development (10 March 2026) United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

[48] Gurmukh Singh 'Sarbat Da Bhala (Well-Being of Human Race' [2026] Sikh Missionary Society (UK).

[49] Harpreet Kaur, 'Teachings of Founder of Sikhism', Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary, Volume 04, Issue 03, April 2019.

trading partners alike (with some exceptions[50]). It establishes an international standard to ensure parity by preventing states from offering preferential treatment, special privileges, or lower tariffs to favoured nations. Through the consistent implementation of these principles, careful regulation of international trade, and the encouragement of moral integrity, fair practices, and anti-exploitation measures (*Kirat Karo*[51]), this strain can be reduced.

However, barriers to IETL prevent it from performing effectively and reduce the benefit to both states and individuals. To streamline international processes and increase efficiency, many governing bodies rely on the implied consent of signatory states, respecting sovereignty by granting states a de facto veto power. However, this may undermine the efficacy of international law, exacerbating power imbalances and weaponised interdependence. When states become more concerned about their own self-interest, they may abuse their power to control trade deals, utilising trade sanctions and unilateral tariffs to benefit their own economy at the expense of others, ultimately exploiting mutual economic reliance as a coercive tool.

This has been evident in recent years in the ongoing paralysis of the WTO Appellate Body (WTOAB) 50. Established in 1995, it serves as a final court of appeal, helping to resolve international trade disputes peacefully. Unlike other bodies, it does not offer binding legal remedies for infractions. Instead, it reviews appeals from dispute panels on questions of law

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[50] Customs unions and free-trade areas; the enabling clause designed to give preferential treatment and lower tariffs exclusively to developing nations to support economic growth; trade remedies and unfair completions such as the anti-dumping duties, designed to stop foreign goods being sold below cost and causing harm to domestic industries; and where matters or public policy or security forbid it.
'Understanding the MFN Clause: Equal Trading Terms Explained' *(Investopedia, Will Kenton, Michael J Boyle, and Vikki Velasquez,* 23 May 2026) <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/mostfavorednation.asp> Accessed 3 August 2026).

[51] No. 47.

to determine whether global trade rules have been applied fairly and consistently. It may then uphold, modify, or reverse those panels' decisions; it may also make voluntary recommendations regarding future compliance. It was widely regarded as a reliable referee until 2019, when the United States, citing political, economic and sovereignty concerns, used its veto power to block the appointment of a new judge, crippling the Appellate Body and rendering it impotent. However, trade disputes continue. Unable to act, appeals are left in legal limbo, fracturing global economic relationships and stagnating IETL processes.

Although frustrating and ineffective at times, IETL remains an important aspect of international governance. Without collective oversight and regulation, nations could abuse their power and status to pursue their own self-interest to the detriment of the global community. The value of IETL stems from its ability to provide stability, predictability, and fairness and encourage cooperative international relationships through peaceful resolutions.

INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

Unlike states, nature is not concerned with physical boundaries or political borders. International Environmental Law (IEL) acknowledges the adverse effects of human activity on the Earth and the ever-expanding list of accompanying consequences. Pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, deforestation, and resource depletion are major global concerns[52]. IEL seeks to reduce and restore environmental damage and its effects by balancing economic growth and environmental sustainability and encouraging inter-state co-

[52] 'Ten Ways Population Growth Impacts the Environment' (*Population Connection,* 05 June 2026) <https://populationconnection.org/blog/world-environment-day/> Accessed 2 August 2026).

operation, based on our shared legal, moral, and ethical responsibility to protect and preserve our natural environment.

Reverence for and devotion to the Earth is nothing new. Guru Nanak expressed great admiration for nature as a sacred manifestation of the Divine, which must be protected and respected: *'Air is the Guru, Water the Father, Earth the Great Mother*[53]*'*. His teachings are evident in the lived work of the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, who established Kiratpur Sahib, a town that protected nature by creating parks, gardens, and wildlife sanctuaries. It is a home for peace, faith, harmony and community in veneration of the Divine.

The effect of environmental decline extends beyond the natural world. This commitment to preserving nature is central to humanity's longevity. In response to growing environmental concerns, IEL has a proven record of success. Effective examples include the Montreal Protocol[54], which targeted ozone-depleting chemicals and achieved an almost 98% reduction in production and usage. Recent research demonstrates the protocol's success, with the ozone layer continuing to show signs of recovery[55].

A first-of-its-kind international treaty, the Convention on Biological Diversity[56], increased the scope of IEL, shifting the focus to biodiversity and acknowledging the impact of economic

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[53] Sri Guru Granth Sahib, English & Punjabi Translation, Volume 1, pp. 27 (Published by Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar).

[54] Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (Adopted on 16 September 1987, Entered into Force on 1 January 1989).

[55] 'Small and short-lived 2025 ozone hole confirms long term recovery trend' (*World Meteorological Organisation,* 12 December 2025) < https://wmo.int/media/news/small-and-short-lived-2025-ozone-hole-confirms-long-term-recovery-trend> Accessed 3 August 2026.

[56] The Convention on Biological Diversity (22 May 1992).

growth upon environmental sustainability. Signed by 196 states, it continues to focus international efforts towards creating a sustainable future[57].

The Paris Agreement[58] is an international commitment to reduce rising global temperatures and reverse the effects of climate change. It places the onus on individual states to determine their impact through Nationally Determined Contributions. States provide 5-year updates and Long-Term Strategies and collaborate to provide financial, technological, and capacity-building support to advance environmentally conscious and sustainable development.

The voluntary nature and flexibility of IEL are intended to encourage collaboration, state ratification, and consistent implementation and compliance, without which IEL fails. It allows for self-determination, whereby states may pinpoint areas of concern within their own borders and devise a suitable plan of action. However, as reflected throughout the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework[59], states often prioritise their own self-interest and economic growth over the common good, as further evidenced by the Global Plastics Treaty Negotiations[60] in 2024-2025. The UN attempted to forge a legally binding treaty focused on plastic pollution and reducing overconsumption. Negotiations failed when major oil-producing and industrial nations rejected mandatory caps on plastic production. States argued

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[57] The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) was adopted by the members states of the Convention on Biodiversity on the 19th of December 2022. Finalised during the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the KMGBF sets new targets to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and encourage harmony with nature by 2050. 'Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework' (*UN Environmental Programme,* Convention on Biological Diversity, 19 December 2022) <https://www.unep.org/resources/kunming-montreal-global-biodiversity-framework> Accessed 4 August 2026).

[58] Paris Agreement (Adopted 12 December 2015, Entered into Force 4 November 2016).

[59] Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (19 December 2022) Convention on Biological Diversity, Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, 7-19 December 2022, CBD/COP/DEC/15/4.

[60] 'What is the Global Plastics Treaty?' (*Global Plastic Action Partnership,* 2026) <https://www.globalplasticaction.org/globalplasticstreaty> Accessed 1 August 2026).

that the treaty should focus on waste management and recycling rather than on limiting plastic production, which could damage economic infrastructure. This further showcases a clear weakness within IEL. The focus is often on mitigating the environmental impacts of economic development, allowing constant and considerable growth, rather than implementing economic limits in favour of environmental sustainability.

Again, this highlights how the abuse of the consent-based model, ambiguous and vague language, and slow international processes often undermine key principles of international law. Despite these frustrations and limitations, IEL has proven fruitful. It offers hope for an environmentally sound future, where states consider their impact upon the global environment and work collaboratively to protect and restore nature for the good of all people.

CONCLUSION

This essay sought to answer the question, '*Why have international law?'*.

Concerned with the protection and preservation of all people, international law endeavours to bridge the gap between power and justice. It pervades beyond the confines of national institutions to influence state behaviour both domestically and internationally. United by this shared objective, it underlines the necessity for mutual external oversight.

States govern in accordance with domestic law. By mutual consent, international law encourages a global standard to protect the most vulnerable, overlooked, or defenceless.

The result is an extension beyond the scope of predetermined, apparently disparate disciplines, whereby the intersectionality of international law acts as a pharmakon[61].

This duality neatly answers the question. Legislation alone is insufficient. At its core, it is aspirational. The practical fulfilment of international obligations accentuates its inherent value. It encourages a wider perspective that transcends self-interest, shedding national political ideology to provide balance. Consistent implementation could facilitate the world Guru Nanak envisioned: one free from social divisions and tyranny, where community is the standard, not the goal, united through our commonalities rather than divided.

[61] In ancient Greek *Phármakon* describes the complexity and ambiguity of a thing with two opposite meanings. Plato introduced the deconstructive characterisation of writing as a pharmakon, both a poison and an antidote, both a corrupter of memory and a preserver of memory. Jaques Derrida interprets this notion of *Pharmakon* as anything that simultaneously means both remedy and poison, dismantling clean binary oppositions.
Aušra Urbonienė, 'Jaques Derrida's Interpretation of Pharmakon' [2009] *Problemos*, History of Philosophy, Kaunas University of Technology, Volume 76, pp. 196-205.

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