UN80: Reform of the Multilateral Environmental Agreements

Around the Triple Planetary Crisis of Pollution, Biodiversity, and Climate Change

Edited by Felix Dodds and Chris Spence

Reflections by Liz Dowdeswell

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ABOUT STAKEHOLDER FORUM

Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future (SF) is a not-for-profit international organisation working to advance sustainable development at all levels. For more than 25 years, SF has been a bridge between stakeholders of all kinds and the international intergovernmental forums where sustainable development, and in particular the environment and issues related to its good governance, are debated, global goals are established, and strategies are mapped out. Our work aims to enhance open, accountable, and participatory decision-making and good governance for sustainable development through the continuous involvement and participation of stakeholders in these forums, and in the action that flows from their work.

To this end, we work with a diversity of stakeholders globally on international policy development and advocacy; stakeholder engagement and consultation; media and communications, and capacity building – all with the ultimate objective of promoting progressive outcomes on sustainable development through an open and participatory approach. In consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1996, SF also works with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under an MOU to expand the engagement and participation of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders in the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Felix Dodds and Chris Spence

"This is a good time to take a look at ourselves and see how fit for purpose we are in a set of circumstances which, let's be honest, are quite challenging for multilateralism and for the UN," Guy Ryder, Under-Secretary-General for Policy and chair of the UN80 Task Force.

There is no question that the world is in one of its most difficult periods and that multilateralism is under threat. These are not just the ones the UN refers to as the Triple Planetary Crisis – climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution –but also migration and displacement, conflict, and the emergence of many new technologies that will impact our societies in ways we can only imagine.

The UN80 Initiative was set up to rebuild multilateralism for this time and to ensure that the United Nations is fit for purpose.

This report focuses on the opportunity to finish the work of the former UNEP Executive Directors Klaus Toepfer and Achim Steiner on "clustering" the UN treaties on pollution (chemicals and waste), biodiversity, and climate change. It also examines how the relevant science bodies for these three clusters can cooperate more effectively and proposes that the Global Environment Ministers Forum be re-established to meet in the year the UN Environment Assembly does not convene.

The proposals are not new and have the benefit of proof of concept, as the pollution conventions of Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm have already been successfully clustered. We believe the best way to move forward now, and build on the success in clustering the pollution treaties, is first to bring the biodiversity conventions under UNEP into a cluster. After this, we propose bringing together the two "climate" conventions – the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer – under another organizational cluster.

With the proposal for the re-establishment of the Global Environment Ministers Forum, we again have proof of concept. There is no question that we need a place to address the interlinkages between the three issue clusters, and that this work should be informed by the scientific bodies.

What we are suggesting in this report addresses the three focus areas of UN80 reform, namely:

1. Improving internal efficiency and effectiveness, cutting red tape, and optimizing the UN's global footprint by relocating some functions to lower-cost duty stations
2. A mandate implementation review (in a way to strengthen the environmental side of the multilateral environmental agreement)
3. Exploring whether structural changes and programme realignment are needed across the UN System

We hope that UNEA 7 might address the suggestions in this report by:

Requesting the UNEP Executive Director to produce a report for UNEA 8 on options for the clustering of the Biodiversity Conventions under UNEP and the clustering of the

two climate conventions of the UNFCCC and the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer

It also further requests the UNEP Executive Director to look at how the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and the recently-established Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution (ISP-CWP), and the Global Environmental Outlook reports can also better contribute to improving the UN system's ability to deliver transformative change.

The UN80 process offers a chance to build a stronger and more effective environmental pillar as we address the huge challenges in front of us.

As Guy Ryder stated recently, we need a "UN system which is able to deliver more effectively, to strengthen and consolidate trust in multilateral action … A system which can convey to public opinion and political decision-makers that this is an organization worth investing in [and] that this should be your preferred option when it comes to meeting the challenges of the future."

Felix Dodds is an adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina's Water Institute, a consultant advising stakeholders on United Nations engagement, and a Fellow at Stakeholder Forum. He has written or edited 26 books, including ***Heroes of Environmental Diplomacy*** (Routledge, 2022), ***Tomorrow's People and New Technologies*** (Routledge, 2021), and ***Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*** (Routledge, 2016). Felix was also a key contributor to the UN's sustainable development initiatives, including chairing the 2011 UN DPI NGO conference that proposed the first Sustainable Development Goals.

Chris Spence is an environmentalist, writer, and former leader of non-profits in New York, New Zealand, and California. He has consulted for the UN, IUCN, and IISD, working in over 40 countries. An award-winning writer, his books include ***Heroes of Environmental Diplomacy*** (Routledge, 2022) and ***Global Warming: Personal Solutions for a Healthy Planet*** (2005). Chris has also served as a journalist.

REFLECTIONS by Liz Dowdeswell

Unprecedented times. A period of great uncertainty. Fast-paced technological developments. Geopolitical distress and fragmentation. Deepening inequity and lack of empathy. A questioning of values and ethics. No safe space for respectful and civil conversations and building consensus. Does that describe the moment?

And yet the world community has a track record of success. Eighty years of multilateralism and collaboration. Progress in lifting people out of poverty. Reduction in morbidity and mortality. Increasing levels of literacy. Protection of endangered species and reversing environmental degradation. Identification of a global agenda. More to be done to be sure – much unfinished business.

Well-functioning organizations strive to be relevant, responsive, and resilient. And so it is that the world community is asking itself some serious questions. Does the United Nations remain fit for purpose? Does it demonstrate relevance and responsiveness to a changing and complex world of simultaneous polycrises? Does it have the tools and resources to be

resilient? Does this club of nations hold itself accountable for achieving real results? If not, what is the alternative?

For several decades now, the United Nations Environment Programme has been diligently assessing the state of the environment, bringing new science and knowledge to bear, responding to evolving concepts of sustainability, contributing collaboratively to the design and execution of a global plan – the Sustainable Development Goals. And always on the table is the dialogue about environmental governance and organizational architecture.

The authors of this publication have sensed this moment of necessity and opportunity. Building on past discussions, demonstrating proof of concept and competence, and harnessing the insights of a broad community, they enter into the conversation about UN reform. Their singular focus is on achieving scientific coherence, policy alignment and operational efficiencies through the clustering of major environmental agreements.

There are choices to be made. Will the vision be bold and ambitious, or will a more cautious and pragmatic incremental approach meet with consensus? Can hope be turned into tangible action, commitment into actual results? Is it really possible to think systemically, integrating the goals of economic prosperity, environmental stewardship, and social and cultural cohesion? Do we have the courage to deal with the inevitable trade-offs among competing objectives in the search for a common cause? Is there persuasive and persistent leadership that will build trust amongst all parties?

What we do know is that the world seems to have been turned upside down. These extraordinary times demand the very best of us, and we will be tested. Anxiously wringing our hands will not unleash the collective potential inspiration that we can bring. A process that considers diverse views, that seeks out multiple perspectives in genuine and transparent dialogue, is required to be considered trustworthy of protecting the public interest. It is a shared responsibility. Do not doubt that the accumulated insight, wisdom, and experience of UNEP matters.

The path to peace, prosperity, and protection of the planet will inevitably point to fundamental ethical issues of solidarity, respect, and rebalancing of power. Sustainability is a framework that recognizes our interdependence and mutual vulnerability. If applied in a spirit of humility, optimism, and humanity, together we could save lives and livelihoods.

Liz Dowdeswell, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (1992-1998)

UN REFORM: IS IT TIME TO RENEW THE IDEA OF CLUSTERING THE MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL AGREEMENTS?

by Felix Dodds and Chris Spence

It was Winston Churchill who said, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” He suggests that even in a crisis, which we surely are for multilateralism, we can find opportunities for positive change and progress.

We raised the issue of clustering environmental conventions in our recent article for IPS, “How Should the United Nations Respond to Its Funding Crisis?”

This article expands the idea of clustering the key environmental conventions to strengthen international environmental governance, and the United Nations Environment Programme, the body that is tasked with being:

“The leading global authority on the environment. It unites 193 Member States in an effort to find solutions to climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste, collectively known as the triple planetary crisis.” (UNEP, 2025)

We suggest strengthening UNEP in these three areas. To do so, we will need to delve a little deeper into the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating this approach into the UN reform process.

According to the World Trade Organization, there are over 250 Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in force (WTO, 2025). Although an older paper by UNEP put the figure closer to 500. This proposal does not attempt to address all of these.

Many of the environmental conventions were established through the relevant governing body of UNEP at the time. As they become ratified conventions, they have their own governing bodies, and the pertinent issues of climate, biodiversity, and chemicals, in the case of the triple planetary crisis, are no longer in the centre policy arena of UNEP.

Since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, there has been growing recognition that the proliferation of environmental challenges necessitates the formation of numerous global and regional conventions to address issues ranging from climate change to biodiversity loss and pollution control.

This has led to a fragmented set of environmental conventions with overlapping work, increased inefficiencies, and gaps while addressing interconnected similar concerns. It makes it more difficult to see the benefits that could occur from synergies and linkages between the various conventions. It reduces the ability of UNEP to be that global voice for the environment.

Klaus Toepfer, the UNEP Executive Director (1998-2006), initiated the conversation around the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), suggesting that to strengthen the environmental pillar, member states should consider clustering the key environmental conventions. This resulted in the UNEP Governing Council adopting a decision in February 2002 to support the programmatic clustering of related Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA), including the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions.

This decision followed the work of a UNEP Intergovernmental Group on International Environmental Governance. In November 2001, the secretariats of environmental conventions prepared an issues paper outlining the potential for closer cooperation in areas like capacity-building and information sharing. The 2002 Governing Council's decision specifically supported further consideration of clustering measures and the undertaking of pilot projects. This move aimed to facilitate an integrated life-cycle approach to managing substances covered by these conventions.

“(n) The clustering approach to multilateral environmental agreements holds some promise, and issues relating to the location of secretariats, meeting agendas, and also programmatic cooperation between such bodies and with UNEP should be addressed.” (UNEP, 2002)

It goes on to suggest that in science, which is a fundamental part of UNEP’s mandate, that:

“27. UNEP should continue, in close cooperation with the secretariats of the multilateral environmental agreements, to enhance such synergies and linkages including on issues related to scientific assessments on matters of common concern.” (UNEP, 2002)

There was also enhanced support for enhancing collaboration among multilateral environmental agreement secretariats in specific areas where common issues arise, such as current work among the chemicals and waste multilateral environmental agreement

secretariats and including the interim secretariats, as well as biological diversity-related conventions. Climate wasn't mentioned because it isn't a convention which UNEP has any administrative responsibility to it was set up by the UN General Assembly and not a process initiated by UNEP.

Final thoughts from Clustering environmental conventions—bringing related agreements under a cohesive framework—offers a pathway to achieving:

Enhanced Policy Coordination greater coherence, efficiency, and impactful outcomes.

Below, we explore the myriad benefits of this approach.

1. Enhanced Policy Coherence

One of the most significant advantages of clustering environmental conventions is the creation of a unified policy framework. Environmental issues such as deforestation, water pollution, and climate change are deeply interconnected, meaning that actions in one area often impact others. Clustering facilitates harmonized decision-making across conventions, reducing contradictions and ensuring that policies complement rather than undermine each other. For instance, coordinating climate action strategies with biodiversity protection can prevent unintended consequences, such as renewable energy installations that harm critical habitats.

2. Greater Resource Efficiency

Managing multiple standalone environmental conventions can strain financial and human resources. Clustering enables the pooling of resources, reducing redundancies in administrative functions such as reporting, monitoring, and capacity-building. A centralized secretariat or shared platforms can significantly lower operational costs while improving the delivery of technical and financial assistance to member states. This efficiency is particularly beneficial for developing countries with limited capacities to engage with numerous, separate agreements.

3. Streamlined Reporting and Compliance

Countries that are parties to multiple environmental conventions often face the burden of duplicative reporting requirements, which can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Clustering conventions allow for the standardization of reporting formats and timelines, making it easier for parties to comply with obligations. Moreover, a unified compliance mechanism can provide a more comprehensive assessment of a country's environmental performance, fostering transparency and accountability.

4. Amplified Synergies Between Conventions

Environmental conventions often share similar objectives, such as the conservation of ecosystems or the mitigation of environmental degradation. By clustering, these agreements can leverage their shared goals to amplify their collective impact. For example, integrating the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) can create synergies that address multiple challenges simultaneously. Joint initiatives, such as ecosystem-based approaches to adaptation, benefit from the strengths of multiple frameworks working in concert.

5. Improved Stakeholder Engagement

Clustering conventions can make it easier for stakeholders—including governments, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and local communities—to engage with

international environmental governance. A streamlined system reduces complexity, fostering better understanding and participation. Stakeholders are more likely to contribute effectively when they can navigate a cohesive framework rather than a fragmented landscape of isolated agreements.

6. Stronger Focus on Cross-Cutting Issues

The clustering of conventions provides an opportunity to address cross-cutting issues that may be overlooked in isolated agreements. Topics such as sustainable development, gender equity, and indigenous rights are relevant across many environmental agreements but often lack a singular platform for discussion. Clustering creates the space for these critical issues to be integrated into the broader environmental agenda, ensuring that they receive the attention and action they deserve.

7. Enhanced Global Collaboration

Environmental challenges are inherently global in nature, requiring collective action and international cooperation. Clustering conventions fosters a sense of unity among parties, encouraging collaboration and information-sharing. This unified approach strengthens partnerships and builds trust among nations, which is essential for tackling transboundary and global ecological issues. Additionally, a clustered framework can promote the sharing of best practices and innovative solutions across conventions.

8. Strengthened Monitoring and Evaluation

Effective monitoring and evaluation are crucial for assessing the progress of environmental agreements. Clustering conventions allows for the development of integrated monitoring systems that provide a holistic view of environmental trends and outcomes. This comprehensive approach helps identify gaps, track progress, and inform evidence-based decision-making. For instance, a unified system could better assess the cumulative impacts of climate policies on biodiversity and ecosystem services.

9. Increased Political Momentum

A clustered approach to environmental conventions can generate greater political momentum by presenting a cohesive and compelling narrative about global ecological priorities. A unified framework simplifies communication and advocacy, making it easier to rally political support and mobilize public awareness. This momentum is critical for securing funding, driving ambitious targets, and maintaining long-term commitment to environmental objectives.

10. Addressing Emerging Challenges

The environmental landscape is constantly evolving, with new challenges such as plastic pollution, zoonotic diseases, and the impacts of artificial intelligence on ecosystems coming to the forefront. Clustering conventions allow for a more agile and adaptive governance system that can respond to emerging issues in a coordinated manner. By working together, conventions can identify gaps in existing frameworks and develop joint strategies to address novel threats.

Conclusion

The clustering of environmental conventions represents a pragmatic and forward-thinking approach to global environmental governance. By enhancing policy coherence, improving resource efficiency, and amplifying synergies, clustering can help address the complex and interconnected nature of today's ecological challenges. While the process of integration may require political will and institutional reforms, the long-term benefits far outweigh

the initial hurdles. In an era where environmental issues are becoming increasingly urgent, clustering conventions offers a pathway to a more efficient, effective, and inclusive global response. It is a call to action for nations and stakeholders to work together to safeguard the planet for future generations.

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THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BASEL, ROTTERDAM, AND STOCKHOLM CONVENTIONS SHOWS HOW CLUSTERING MULTILATERAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGREEMENTS BRINGS MULTIPLE BENEFITS TO THE ENVIRONMENT

By Michael Stanley-Jones

The UN80 Initiative, unveiled in March by Secretary-General António Guterres, is a system-wide effort to "reaffirm the UN's relevance for a rapidly changing world."[i]

The Initiative comes at a time of brutal budget cuts across the UN system.[ii] The United Nations High Commission for Refugees is cutting 3,500 jobs and making reductions in senior positions and offices to manage budget shortfalls. The World Health Organisation is expected to cut 20-25% of its global staff. Cuts at The World Food Programme range up to 30%.

And yet the needs served by the United Nations remain stark. The UN appealed for US$29 billion in funding for the Global Humanitarian Overview 2025 to assist nearly 180 million vulnerable people, including refugees, in December 2024. Near the midpoint of the year, just $5.6 billion - less than 13 per cent - had been received.

Facing this harsh fiscal environment, the Secretary-General established seven thematic clusters under the UN80 Initiative covering peace and security, humanitarian action, development (Secretariat and UN system), human rights, training and research, and specialised agencies to improve coordination, reduce fragmentation, and realign functions where needed.

The UN80 Task Force is scheduled to release its recommendations at the end of July.

In their timely opinion piece, "UN Reform: Is it Time to Renew the Idea of Clustering the Major Environmental Agreements?", Felix Dodds and Chris Spence advocate for "clustering

[i] United Nations (June 23, 2025). UN80 Initiative: What it is – and why it matters to the world | UN News.

[ii] United Nations (June 16, 2025). Brutal cuts mean brutal choices warns UN relief chief, launching 'survival appeal'. UN News.

key conventions and bringing scientific bodies to strengthen international environmental governance, while also offering potential cost savings."[iii]

"Currently, there are hundreds of different multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) in force, but perhaps only 20-30 core global MEAs with broad international participation," Dodds and Spence write.

Bringing the fragmented set of environmental conventions together in clusters to address the interconnected issues they address could strengthen their work, reduce inefficiencies, and fill significant gaps in how the UN approaches the triple plenary crises of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution.

There is one experience that suggests how such a clustering of MEA secretariats could be accomplished. In 2009, on an *ad interim* basis, the Joint Convention Services of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions was set up, preparatory to a decision by an extraordinary conferences of the parties of the three chemicals and wastes conventions to establish a joint Secretariat in February 2010.

I was hired as the first staff member assigned to serve the three conventions equally in December 2009, holding the position of Public Information Officer in the Rotterdam Convention Secretariat while acting on behalf of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions until August 2014. This gave me a ringside view of the process of "synergies" between the three clustered conventions.

My assignment covered media relations, public information and outreach, including helping manage the joint conventions' synergies website. The first lesson drawn from the experience of what we called "the synergies process" was that public information provided a fertile ground for joint activity between the three independent conventions.

A more important lesson concerns how the groundwork was successfully laid for the establishment of a joint 'BRS' Secretariat. The process needs to be owned and embraced by the Parties to the Conventions themselves. As legally independent entities, they must be the drivers of any envisioned reform.

A country-led working group was established with co-chairpersonship nominated by Parties from the North and South to steer the process. This ensured that the changes would have the political backing of the parties themselves.

A third lesson is that the leadership of the newly formed cluster of conventions' secretariat needed to be placed in one team. In practice, this meant consolidating the executives of the three conventions (on the UNEP side, as Rotterdam has a joint secretariat shared by UNEP and FAO). Having multiple executives retarded the synergies process. Reducing three executive posts down to one brought coherence as well as significant cost savings. The streamlining of secretariat staff further contributed to creating a more efficient, less costly secretariat.

Such administrative measures brought relatively these minor benefits when placed side-by-side with the larger structural reforms of the synergies process. Future conferences of the

[iii] Felix Dodds and Chris Spence (July 17, 2025). UN Reform: Is it Time to Renew the Idea of Clustering the Major Environmental Agreements? - Inter Press Service.

Parties (COPs) of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions are now held back-to-back on a biennial schedule.

For the more than 180 governments that attend the 'SuperCOPs', the efficiencies gained in time, travel and expense are obvious. The joint nature of the conferences also allows for a greater exchange of information and views between the parties to the conventions, helping close gaps in implementation and increasing understanding of how the actions of any one MEA impact the others.

Ultimately, this may be the highest benefit clustering of thematically-related instruments can bring to global environmental governance.

Michael Stanley-Jones is Environmental Policy and Governance Fellow at the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health, Canada. He supports research that addresses the future of global environmental governance, with a focus on climate justice, rightsholders' participation in environmental decision-making, and sustainable development. He also contributes to fostering synergies between the Rio conventions (CBD, UNCCD, UNFCCC) and discussions on the post-2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other UN processes.

He previously served as an Environmental Affairs Officer at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, within the Aarhus Convention Secretariat from 2004 to 2009. He joined the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as a Public Information Officer with the Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions in 2009 and served as a Programme Management Officer in the UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative / Action for Sustainable Development Goals from 2014 to 2022.

TOWARD ENHANCED SYNERGIES AMONG BIODIVERSITY-RELATED MEAS: ADDRESSING FRAGMENTATION WITH STRATEGIC COORDINATION

By Hugo-Maria Schally

Introduction

The governance of nature and biodiversity has evolved from early 20th-century treaties on hunting and migratory species to today's complex web of multilateral environmental agreements. Initial efforts, such as the 1902 Convention for the Protection of Birds useful to Agriculture, reflected utilitarian concerns, but by the 1970s, global awareness of extinction and habitat loss led to more systemic instruments, including the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971) and Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (1973). The 1992 Rio Earth Summit marked a turning point with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the first treaty to address biodiversity at genetic, species, and ecosystem levels, supported by the Global Environment Facility as a financial mechanism. Since then, biodiversity governance has expanded through additional conventions, protocols and scientific platforms such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), but has also become increasingly fragmented.

Global biodiversity loss continues at alarming rates, despite this dense architecture of internationally agreed rules and institutions. Biodiversity-related Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) span terrestrial, freshwater, and marine realms; regulate access to genetic resources and trade in species; set site-based protections; and address drivers of land degradation and desertification. Yet, implementation remains hampered by institutional fragmentation, duplicative reporting burdens, and misaligned financial flows.

Against this backdrop, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) provides a shared vision for 2030 and 2050. Converting that vision into action requires not merely more resources, but better coordination—within and across MEAs, and between MEAs and broader sustainable development processes.

This article (i) maps the mandates and legal obligations of the principal biodiversity-related MEAs, (ii) analyses governance fragmentation and financial constraints, (iii) explores political dynamics among key actors, and (iv) proposes realistic, equity-centred pathways for strategic coherence, with comparisons to the more integrated chemicals and waste cluster.

1. Mandates, Legal Functions, and Obligations of Key Biodiversity-Related MEAs

1.1 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Protocols

The CBD's tripartite objective—conservation, sustainable use, and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources—is codified in Article 1. Parties are obligated to prepare and implement National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and to report at regular intervals. The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety establishes precautionary and risk assessment procedures for the transboundary movement of Living Modified Organisms (LMOs), while the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization operationalizes Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS) by requiring national frameworks for access permits, benefit-sharing, and compliance measures. The KMGBF provides a global goal and target structure to guide CBD implementation.

1.2 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

CITES regulates international trade through a system of appendices and permits, supported by compliance review and trade-related measures. Its focus is targeted—ensuring that trade does not threaten species' survival—complementing broader conservation duties under CBD. CITES' decisions and periodic reviews create quasi-regulatory effects at national borders, with enforcement typically delegated to customs and wildlife authorities.

1.3 Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)

CMS requires range states to cooperate to conserve migratory species and their habitats, often via MoUs and specialized regional agreements. Its 'umbrella' function has catalysed multiple instruments and action plans across taxa and flyways.

1.4 Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

Ramsar obliges Parties to designate wetlands of international importance and to promote their 'wise use.' Its compliance approach is facilitative and cooperative—anchored in site listing, monitoring, and the Montreux Record—rather than punitive measures.

1.5 World Heritage Convention (WHC)

The WHC, administered by UNESCO, integrates natural and cultural heritage through site nomination, protection, and monitoring. While enforcement is largely reputational (e.g., inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger), the Convention has proven influential in safeguarding globally significant ecosystems and landscapes.

1.6 International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA)

ITPGRFA establishes a Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-Sharing (MLS) for a defined list of crops and forages essential to food security. The proceeds from that system finances on-the-ground projects that sustain agrobiodiversity and farmer resilience. The Treaty complements CBD/Nagoya by providing sector-specific ABS tailored to plant genetic resources for food and agriculture.

1.7 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

UNCCD aims to combat desertification and mitigate drought effects through national action programmes and regional cooperation. Its land-use orientation connects directly to biodiversity and climate agendas, particularly on ecosystem restoration, drought resilience, and sustainable land management.

1.8 Agreement under UNCLOS on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ)

The most recent addition to the MEA system for nature and biodiversity, the BBNJ Agreement, which has yet to enter into force, addresses conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction—roughly two-thirds of the ocean. Its four pillars encompass marine genetic resources (including benefit-sharing), area-based management tools (including marine protected areas), environmental impact assessments, and capacity building/technology transfer. It complements the CBD, whose scope is limited to areas under national jurisdiction. The Agreement foresees a COP, subsidiary scientific/technical bodies, a secretariat, and compliance arrangements; it also provides for benefit-sharing modalities and a voluntary trust fund to support participation and early implementation.

2. Governance Fragmentation and Institutional Complexity

Biodiversity governance is institutionally dispersed across UNEP (CBD, CITES, CMS), FAO (ITPGRFA), UNESCO (WHC), independent or IUCN-hosted secretariats (Ramsar), directly under UNGA (UNCCD) and the UNCLOS system (BBNJ). This dispersion yields divergent rules, reporting schedules, compliance approaches, and scientific interfaces. By contrast, the chemicals and waste cluster, where there is a uniform link to UNEP as a hosting institution, has progressively institutionalized synergies (shared services, coordinated COPs), producing clearer lines of authority and operational economies of scale.

2.1 UNEP and the Environment Management Group (EMG)

UNEP provides a convening platform and hosts several biodiversity secretariats; through the EMG it seeks to promote UN system-wide coherence. However, neither UNEP nor EMG

has binding authority over treaty bodies. Their effectiveness hinges on political buy-in, voluntary coordination, and financing. Past reviews have cautioned against proliferating stand-alone secretariats and have encouraged shared services and clustering where mandates allow.

2.2 Science-Policy Interfaces

IPBES has strengthened the knowledge base for biodiversity policy, but linkages to individual MEAs vary. Unlike the chemicals and waste cluster—which benefits from standing scientific committees (e.g., POPRC, CRC)—biodiversity MEAs rely on a patchwork of SBSTTAs, technical working groups, and ad hoc expert committees. A more connected science interface would support cross-MEA target setting, monitoring, and methodological alignment.

2.3 Legal and Operational Overlaps

Overlaps are evident in ABS (CBD/Nagoya, ITPGRFA, and BBNJ), site-based conservation (Ramsar, WHC, CBD), and species measures (CITES, CMS, CBD). Countries face capacity overload from multiple national focal points and asynchronous reporting cycles. Harmonized reporting and data platforms can reduce this burden; the CBD-led Data Reporting Tool for MEAs (DaRT) could be a promising step if broadly adopted.

3. Financial Mechanisms and Constraints

Finance is the critical enabler of synergy. CITES, RAMSAR and CMS lack a dedicated financial mechanism and rely on ad hoc external funding, including from the Global Environment Facility (GEF). The GEF currently also serves as the financial mechanism for CBD and its Protocols, UNCCD, and is expected to support BBNJ-related actions as these kick in after its entry into force. Cumulatively, GEF has allocated over USD 22 billion in grants with substantial co-financing. Yet funding often flows through siloed windows aligned to individual MEAs, complicating multi-convention projects.

3.1 Beyond GEF: Complementary Funds

The ITPGRFA MLS provides resources to farmer-led conservation and breeding initiatives. Ramsar and WHC depend heavily on voluntary contributions and project finance, creating chronic underfunding for site management and monitoring. The BBNJ Agreement includes a voluntary trust fund to facilitate early implementation and participation by developing countries as well as a special trust fund to be alimented by proceeds from the use of genetic resources in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

3.2 Persistent Gaps and Fragmentation

Despite aggregate growth in biodiversity finance, Parties at CBD COP15 noted continuing gaps between ambition and available resources, alongside barriers to access and absorption. Integrated programming for cross-MEA outcomes remains limited. By comparison, the chemicals and waste cluster uses joint services and synchronized COPs to align budgeting cycles, capacity building, and technical assistance, creating a more coherent pipeline of support.

4. Political Dynamics and Major Actor Positions

Political economy shapes what institutional designs can achieve. Secretariats tend to protect their autonomy; governments weigh sovereignty, trade, and development priorities; and equity concerns remain salient. Contention around digital sequence information (DSI) and ABS illustrates divergent interests across MEAs.

4.1 Major Actors

- United States: outside CBD and Nagoya; engages actively in CITES and sectoral bodies; cautious on multilateral ABS.
- China: strong role in CBD/KMGBF; supportive of capacity building; cautious about far-reaching benefit-sharing modalities under BBNJ.
- India and Brazil: emphasize equity, technology transfer, and fair benefit-sharing; wary of burdens without commensurate support.
- European Union: generally cohesive advocate for biodiversity ambition and cross-MEA coordination, though internal sectoral trade-offs (e.g., agriculture) persist.
- African Group, strong on conservation and sustainable use, focused on the provision of additional financial resources and keen on the establishment of dedicated financial mechanisms.

4.2 Ocean Governance Politics

The BBNJ Agreement must navigate interactions with existing sectoral and regional bodies, notably RFMOs. Debates over institutional hierarchy, benefit-sharing of MGRs (including DSI), and standards for ABMTs/EIAs reflect broader geopolitics and North–South equity concerns.

5. Comparative Insights and Pathways Toward Strategic Coherence

5.1 Lessons from the Chemicals and Waste Cluster

The BRS Conventions operationalize synergies through: (i) joint services and administrative functions; (ii) back-to-back or joint COPs; (iii) harmonized technical assistance and capacity-building strategies; and (iv) standing scientific committees. While mandates remain distinct, institutionalized coordination has yielded efficiencies in budgeting, technical support, and compliance assistance. The Minamata Convention on Mercury, though separate, benefits from and contributes to shared technical platforms and capacity-building networks.

5.2 A Practical Synergy Agenda for Biodiversity MEAs

1) **Joint Work Plans under the KMGBF:** Develop time-bound, target-linked joint programs among CBD, CITES, CMS, Ramsar, WHC, UNCCD, ITPGRFA, and (as it matures) BBNJ. Prioritize cross-cutting areas such as ecosystem restoration, invasive species, wildlife trade, and genetic resources.
2) **Harmonized Reporting and Data Architecture:** Scale up the CBD DART platform across MEAs; align indicators, metadata standards, and submission cycles.
3) **Integrated Funding Windows:** Establish a GEF multi-MEA 'synergy window' either under the General Trust Fund or under the GBFF to finance projects that deliver jointly against KMGBF targets and related MEA obligations; incentivize national-level integrated programming and shared enabling activities.

4) **Coordinated Capacity Building:** Create a joint help-desk and roster of experts servicing multiple MEAs; bundle regional training; and promote South–South cooperation.
5) **Science Interface Linkages:** Mandate reciprocal participation of scientific bodies (e.g., SBSTTAs, CMS Scientific Council) and further formalize channels between IPBES and all biodiversity MEAs.
6) **UNEP/EMG and UNEA Leadership:** Utilize UNEA to adopt resolutions inviting MEAs and UN agencies to report on synergistic implementation and to pilot joint services.
7) **National-Level Integration:** Encourage 'Integrated Biodiversity Implementation Plans' that consolidate NBSAPs with Ramsar site strategies, WHC site management plans, CITES/CMS action plans, UNCCD NAPs, and—where relevant—BBNJ commitments. This reduces duplication and clarifies institutional responsibilities.

5.3 Guardrails for Equity and Effectiveness

Synergy must not translate into additional burdens on developing countries without resources. Equity guardrails can include: predictable finance; technology cooperation; fair access to genetic resources and DSI benefits; and attention to indigenous peoples' and local communities' rights. Political buy-in improves when integration demonstrably reduces workload (e.g., one integrated report instead of many) and mobilizes additional finance.

6. Conclusion

Biodiversity MEAs collectively provide a comprehensive rulebook, but fragmentation blunts their impact. The KMGBF offers a unifying roadmap; the BBNJ Agreement extends governance to the global commons. By institutionalizing joint work, harmonizing reporting and data, integrating finance, and strengthening science and coordination functions, the biodiversity regime can replicate the practical synergies achieved in the chemicals and waste cluster—while also emphasizing equity and capacity. The alternative is continued inefficiency and missed outcomes during a critical decade for nature. Given the institutional complexities of the biodiversity-related MEAS, it might be advisable to establish a two-step process. Bringing the UNEP-hosted secretariats closer together and based on possible results open a broader process to see how the other MEAs that are hosted by other institutions could be brought in.

Endnotes

[0] Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971), text and subsequent COP guidance on wise use and Montreux Record.

[1] Convention on Biological Diversity, Article 1 (Objectives).

[2] Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization; COP-MOP decisions NP-1/6 to NP-5/2 on implementation.

[3] FAO, International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), Benefit-Sharing Fund description (2018).

[4] Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), umbrella function and regional Agreements/MoUs across taxa.

[5] BBNJ Agreement scope: marine genetic resources (including benefit-sharing), area-based management tools, environmental impact assessments, and capacity building/technology transfer.

[6] Global Environment Facility (GEF) cumulative funding to the biodiversity and land degradation focal areas exceeding USD 22 billion in grants.

[7] BBNJ Agreement voluntary trust fund provisions to support participation and early implementation.

[8] UN Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) recommendations cautioning against the proliferation of MEA secretariats and encouraging clustering/shared services.

[9] CBD COP15 outcome documents noting persisting gaps in implementation finance and access/absorption challenges.

[10] CBD COP15 decisions referencing the Data Reporting Tool for MEAs (DaRT) to streamline reporting (e.g., CBD/COP/15/L.4, L.27).

[19] BBNJ benefit-sharing modalities and capacity-building provisions applicable to developing states.

[20] UNCLOS-based institutional arrangements for BBNJ, including COP, subsidiary bodies, and compliance mechanisms.

[21] Interactions with Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) and implications for BBNJ implementation and institutional hierarchy.

Hugo-Maria Schally is the former Head of the Multilateral Environmental Cooperation Unit at the Directorate-General for Environment, European Commission. He was coordinating and developing the EC's work in collaboration with international environmental organisations and multilateral environmental agreements, and the links between trade and environment. He was also in charge of EU policies and legislation regarding global deforestation and forest degradation, international trade in wildlife and the access to and sharing of the benefits derived from the utilisation of genetic resources. He was engaged in the negotiation of multilateral environmental agreements and global conferences such as UNCED 1992, Rio+20, UNFCCC, UNCBD and the international Ozone Treaties, serving also as president of the Implementation Committee of the Montreal Protocol.

UN80 – CLUSTERING THE CLIMATE CONVENTIONS

By Stacey Azores

Introduction

The international governance of environmental challenges has progressively evolved over the past decades, transitioning from isolated treaties addressing specific issues to a complex web of multilateral agreements that aim to foster sustainable development and environmental integrity. Early efforts, such as the 1972 Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment, laid foundational principles emphasising the importance of environmental protection within a broader development agenda (UN, 1972).

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit stands out as the most significant UN gathering dedicated to global environmental governance. This landmark meeting culminated in the adoption of several key agreements, including Agenda 21 — a comprehensive blueprint for sustainable development — along with the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the Forest Principles, which established guiding principles for responsible forest management.

Crucially, the Summit also laid the groundwork for two major international treaties: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Additionally, the Summit initiated the negotiation process for the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Collectively, these agreements and processes reflected a holistic approach to interconnected environmental challenges — biodiversity loss, climate change, and land degradation — aligning scientific insights with emerging political priorities.

These three conventions and other Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) have provided critical platforms for international cooperation. However, their sector-specific mandates have also resulted in fragmented governance.

This fragmentation, characterised by overlapping mandates, divergent institutional arrangements, and separate financial mechanisms, poses significant challenges to achieving holistic solutions to interconnected environmental crises. Meanwhile, scientific evidence increasingly underscores the complex interdependencies among MEAs.

The discussion of UN Reform around UN80 opens the opportunity for significant reform as outlined in Felix Dodds and Chris Spence (July 17, 2025). UN Reform: Is it Time to Renew the Idea of Clustering the Major Environmental Agreements? Inter Press Service.

How efficient is it to maintain separate related conventions as separate UN bodies?

UNEP has identified the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution (including chemicals and waste) as areas where we need to focus if we are to strengthen the environmental pillar of sustainable development. This article explores the evolutionary progress of the UN Climate Convention and, in particular, the possibility of clustering the UNFCCC and the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, the Montreal Protocol, and subsequent amendments.

Climate Change

The international community began to address serious concerns over climate change almost fifty years ago, beginning with the 1979 World Climate Conference organised by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was subsequently established in 1988 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) to assess scientific knowledge on climate change. Its creation aimed to provide policymakers with comprehensive, objective, and policy-relevant information on climate change impacts, adaptation, and mitigation, fostering international cooperation to address global warming.

This was followed by the 1990 Second World Climate Conference in Geneva, hosted jointly by UNEP and WMO, which emphasised the interconnectedness of environmental and climate issues. It reviewed the World Climate Programme (WCP), which had been established in 1979, and recommended the creation of to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Global Climate Observing System (GCOS), both of which were agreed in 1992. This laid the groundwork for a global climate treaty and a robust climate observation network.

These conferences underscored the importance of a coordinated global response, leading to the decision that the negotiations for a comprehensive climate framework would be conducted through a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) decision, rather than under the auspices of UNEP alone, as was common with other environmental treaties like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

This resulted in the establishment of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, which has since evolved through successive negotiations. Five years later, the Kyoto Protocol (1997) set binding emission reduction targets for developed countries, while the Paris Agreement (2015) introduced a more inclusive approach based

on voluntary 'nationally determined contributions' (NDCs) involving all nations. The UNFCCC's governance includes the Conference of the Parties (COP), subsidiary bodies, and financial mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which supports climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. Over time, the focus has shifted increasingly toward climate resilience, adaptation, and addressing loss and damage, acknowledging the differing capacities and responsibilities of countries, especially following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015.

The UN80 suggestion that the UNFCCC should be placed under UNEP's aegis as the *World's Environment Body* re-opens the possibility of creating a cluster of climate-related conventions with the Vienna Convention and the Montreal Protocol, and subsequent amendments, which are already under the auspices of UNEP. Despite these differences, there are significant interconnections and synergies between climate change and ozone protection, especially given their common reliance on scientific assessments and policy frameworks.

Analogy of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions

The agreement by member states to create a cluster of chemicals and waste conventions was taken in 2009, and the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions had their first 'Super Cop' in 2013. This offers a proof of concept for clustering as explained in Michael Stanley Jones' article, How Clustering Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Bring Multiple Benefits to the Environment, published by IPS on July 28th, 2025

UNEP has identified the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution (chemicals and waste) as a vision to strengthen the environmental pillar of sustainable development. The next step would be to look at clustering the climate conventions, followed logically by the biodiversity conventions.

These conventions share a similarity in their supporting subsidiary bodies and increasing inclusivity for regional organisations and scientific panels, yet these are often limited to 'execution' mechanisms for formal coordination. This dispersion has resulted in operational inefficiencies, duplicative efforts, and missed opportunities over many years. Despite overarching concerns about planetary health, their implementation mechanisms have often created stumbling blocks when it comes to implementation actions.

In short, clustering offers the chance to facilitate greater integration among these interconnected challenges, leading to a more effective regime.

Overlapping Mandates

The mandates of the ozone and climate conventions significantly overlap in areas related to atmospheric composition, emissions, and the protection of the Earth's climate and ozone layer.

Both frameworks and their subsequent protocols, agreements, and amendments address issues stemming from human activities that release greenhouse gases and ozone-depleting substances into the atmosphere, which have direct implications for climate change and stratospheric ozone recovery. Scientific bodies such as the IPCC provide critical climate science, while the Scientific Assessment Panel of the Montreal Protocol supplies insights on ozone-depleting substances.

Despite this overlap, the conventions often operate in silos, with climate policies emphasising greenhouse gas mitigation and adaptation, while ozone policies focus on phasing out ozone-depleting substances. This separation can lead to conflicting priorities or missed opportunities for co-benefits, thereby limiting the overall effectiveness of international efforts.

Currently, there are limited formal mechanisms for these bodies to exchange data and coordinate strategies, which hampers the development of integrated policies that address both climate change and ozone layer recovery. Efforts like the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, which targets ozone-depleting HFCs, which are also potent greenhouse gases, highlight the potential for greater synergy. However, institutional barriers and siloed approaches continue to restrict comprehensive action. Both conventions are now trying to address the issue of nitrogen pollution, a major environmental challenge.

Funding Fragmentation

Financial support is channelled through various mechanisms, including the Global Environment Facility and Green Climate Fund (GCF). While these mechanisms have increased overall funding levels, there remains significant fragmentation in financing multi-dimensional initiatives.

Despite increased commitments to mobilise financing for climate change and atmospheric protection, substantial funding gaps persist, particularly in developing countries where ozone depletion and climate vulnerabilities are most severe. For example, climate adaptation projects financed by the GCF may not fully incorporate ozone layer protection measures, limiting the potential for integrated benefits and comprehensive approaches.

The absence of coordinated funding streams complicates the implementation of integrated strategies, such as those that combine climate resilience with ozone layer recovery efforts, requiring investments across multiple sectors and conventions.

Policy Challenges

Addressing policy challenges within UNEP, particularly through the lens of the triple planetary boundaries — the climate change, biosphere integrity, and biogeochemical flows — requires a more integrated and holistic approach.

Currently, sectoral priorities often dominate negotiations, resulting in trade-offs that hinder sustainable development. Infrastructure projects aligned with climate policies can sometimes conflict with biodiversity conservation and resource usage boundaries, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive planning frameworks that account for these interconnected limits.

Could it be time to re-establish the Global Environment Management Forum (GEMF) as a dedicated mechanism within the United Nations Environment Assembly to address the triple planetary crisis?

Such a platform would facilitate dialogue among stakeholders, promote coordination of actions across sectors, and help build consensus on policies that respect planetary boundaries. This integrated mechanism has the potential to improve policy coherence, resolve conflicts, and ensure that climate, biodiversity, and pollution considerations are jointly addressed in global environmental governance. They should be informed by the

three science bodies, the IPCC, IPBAS and the newly established Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution (ISP-CWP)

Other Potential Integrations

Air pollution directly affects ecosystems, human health, and climate systems, so it would make sense to create formal institutional linkages aimed at addressing shared challenges. While it may seem far-fetched to propose that the UN restructures its bodies, the potential long-term benefits for implementation do warrant the effort.

Integrated policies could promote clean energy transitions that cut air pollution, lower greenhouse gases, and improve land health by reducing fossil fuel dependence. A multi-sectoral framework would enable joint action plans, data sharing, and financing—similar to the chemicals conventions—ensuring coordinated efforts for air quality, ecosystems, and climate resilience. This approach would strengthen sustainable development by recognising the interconnectedness of pollution control, biodiversity, climate mitigation, and land restoration (UNEP, 2020).

Beyond Clustering Ozone and the Climate Treaties

The first step in the approach to clustering is to shift the relevant treaties under the aegis of UNEP. This has been applied to the Basel, Rotterdam, and Minamata treaties on chemicals and waste. It should also apply to the biodiversity conventions under UNEP and, if the UNFCCC comes under UNEP, to the ozone and climate agreements.

Beyond those that are under UNEP, there are other conventions globally and regionally that are relevant to the triple planetary crisis. A second step in clustering for climate change would mean addressing the UN Convention on Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP), established under the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). This convention represents a regional framework focused on addressing air pollution across European and Eurasian countries. If CLRTAP were to be integrated more closely with the UNFCCC, its role could become a vital part of a comprehensive, multi-layered environmental governance system that aligns air quality and climate efforts. Ultimately, all these agreements would benefit from being under a unified umbrella.

Conclusion

Addressing the interconnected nature of global environmental challenges requires a strategic shift towards greater institutional integration and coordination among existing treaties and frameworks.

Currently, key scientific assessment platforms such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and the proposed Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution (ISP-CWP) often operate in silos, limited by their distinct mandates and institutional frameworks. This fragmentation hampers the development of integrated scientific advice that could better inform policy and action across sectors.

Lessons learned from successful clustering of conventions, such as the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm agreements, demonstrate that formalised arrangements can enhance operational efficiencies, scientific coherence, and policy alignment.

To address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity and pollution – in addition to arguing here for clustering the climate conventions we have looked at the proof of concept with the BRS conventions and Hugo-Maria Schally in his recent article Toward Enhanced Synergies among Biodiversity-related MEAs: Addressing Fragmentation with Strategic Coordination also makes a strong and coherent argument for the clustering of the biodiversity conventions.

Integrating the scientific platforms under UNEP's umbrella would foster synergies between scientific assessments and policy implementation, and this could significantly enhance more efficient responses by helping to bridge existing gaps, reduce duplication of efforts, and maximise the impact of international environmental action on a global scale.

Proposals have emerged for the reinstatement of GMEF as a high-level mechanism designed to foster higher-level dialogue, streamline decision-making, and bridge sectoral divides for integrated approaches to environmental governance. Expanding platforms like the Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GMEF) or UNEA could serve as pivotal mechanisms to better coordinate efforts across these conventions

Such a change may be hard. It may raise objections from those working under the current arrangements, who may feel uncomfortable with such a change. However, more integrated governance is essential to effectively tackling the triple planetary crisis.

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Stacey Azores participated in UN climate negotiations in various capacities, playing a crucial role in addressing one key adaptation issue. Her work included science, business, and government projects, academic programs, rural expeditions, and raising awareness of implementation and sustainability.

BETTER USE OF THE WORLD'S EXPERTISE IN NAVIGATING THE POLYCRISIS

By Peter Bridgewater and Rakhyun Kim

Other articles in this series on clustering conventions that are addressed by the Triple Environmental Crisis of pollution (Stanley-Jones), biodiversity (Schally), and climate change (Azores) have touched on the idea of clustering not only conventions but the science-policy bodies established separately to serve them. We address the question of the negative consequences of maintaining the *status quo* and identify how "consolidating knowledge" might make a difference.

Azores notes the progressive evolution of environmental challenges and their governance from the 1972 *Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment*, resulting in today's institutional landscape - a complex web of multilateral agreements aiming to foster sustainable development, living in separate spaces with inefficient coordination mechanisms.

From 1945 onwards establishment of the UN and its specialised agencies, including UNESCO and FAO, saw increased focus on the knowledge needed to address environmental issues. From its founding in 1974, UNEP also became increasingly active in this area.

UNESCO established a range of research agendas in biodiversity, earth sciences and water with a range of human-environment links, as did FAO for its areas of responsibility. This research pointed to the interconnected nature of global environmental challenges. The links between climate adaptation, mitigation and biodiversity were identified in the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) "Nexus" assessment (IPBES 2024a).

Both Azores and Schally cite the successful clustering of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm agreements, demonstrating that formalised arrangements can enhance operational efficiencies, scientific coherence, and policy alignment. They also suggest similar clustering of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the IPBES, and the nascent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution

(ISP-CWP) could similarly enhance better links between the knowledge-policy links in resolving the polycrisis of climate change, biodiversity and pollution. Yet the question remains, can such science-policy bodies be clustered easily, or is it preferable to seek ways to enable them to work more effectively?

The science-policy bodies.

Since its establishment in 1988, the IPCC has delivered six Assessment Reports at approximately seven-year intervals. Each of the reports is on climate change and approaches to mitigation and adaptation, yet with changing overall themes. An independent science-led exercise on status and trends in biodiversity and ecosystem services funded by UNEP with support from UNESCO, UNCCD, the Ramsar Convention and a wide range of scientific support was launched in 2000. This *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* was designed to help not only the CBD make more informed policy choices, but also influence all biodiversity-related Conventions, including UNCCD.

But while it was always to be a "one-off", the Millennium Assessment led to pressure for a "biodiversity counterpart to the IPCC", resulting in an intergovernmental meeting that established IPBES in 2012. Since its establishment, IPBES has developed in ways that are different from IPCC – producing a range of thematic, regional and global assessments on issues including; pollination, land degradation, regional and a global assessment on biodiversity and ecosystem services status and trends, sustainable use of wildlife, invasive species, and the values of nature. Its most recent products are an assessment on how to achieve transformative change in managing the environment and an assessment of the nexus between climate change, biodiversity, human health, food and water. Crucially, it has embraced a range of knowledges beyond science.

The third Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel - on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution (ISP-CWP) was officially established on June 20, 2025, by UNEA Resolution 5/8: The ISP-CWP Secretariat is hosted by UNEP, with its first Plenary Expected in 2026. After extensive negotiations, governments have agreed that its role is to provide policy-relevant scientific advice to support sound management of chemicals and waste in the environment and to prevent chemical pollution and protect human health and ecosystems.

So, there are now three science-policy platforms dealing with apparently very different issues. Yet, as the IPBES nexus report details, there are multiple synergies between the topics covered, and the role for the ISP-CWP alludes to including ecosystems in its work. The existence of a report from a workshop in 2021, sponsored by IPCC and IPBES, on biodiversity and climate suggested changes might be afoot, but thus far, each silo remains resolutely separate.

How do the Science-policy bodies work?

The IPCC uses a rigorous, consensus-driven process where assessment drafts undergo multiple rounds of expert and government review to ensure accuracy and neutrality. In a similar vein, IPBES has drafts that are subject to a range of external reviews, culminating in the government-member plenary carefully reviewing the *Summary for Policy Makers* draft before approving it. Both use a range of subsidiary bodies to manage technical and political issues. And both use scenarios and modelling in developing the assessments. IPBES has had more emphasis on bringing a range of knowledges to bear in its assessments, and there is some evidence IPCC is embarking on a similar pathway. It is not yet fully clear

how ISP-CWP will operate, but it seems more focus will be on horizon scanning and links with the corporate world.

All three have a range of constraints: weak funding structures; the need to build capacity in the global south; the elaborate and frustrating approval processes; ensuring material is "confidential' over the life of the assessment, which inhibits the flexibility needed in managing todays environmental pressures; managing data gaps; dealing with rapidly developing novel issues; balancing transparency while ensuring rigour; and avoiding capture by any particular sectoral voices.

Despite the activities of these global science-policy bodies, individual conventions have been producing "global outlooks". The UNCCD has its own science-policy interface, with an unfortunate result that its first Global Land "outlook" was released at the same time as the IPBES assessment on Land degradation and restoration, a considerable duplication of effort. The CBD has produced five *Global Biodiversity Outlooks* since 2001, the last in 2020. And the Ramsar Convention has produced two *Global Wetland Outlooks*, one in 2018 and the most recent in 2025. A *State of the World's Migratory Species* Assessment was published in February 2024 under the CMS.

While it could be argued that the more information available to inform policy development and implementation, the better, this is not an evident result. Rather, production of the outlooks resembles "zombie activity" - producing material for its own sake, without reference to the wider global situation.

Do we need three separate Science-policy Bodies?

It can be argued that we already know which policies need implementation, yet many nations still argue strongly for the need to inform policy development through the best available knowledge. IPCC reports inform UNFCCC & its COPs, IPBES assessments inform CBD, and other biodiversity-relevant conventions, while ISP-CWP aims to support the "chemicals conventions" cluster and guide global regulation of chemicals and waste.

A major player is UNEP-GEO (Global Environment Outlook) which has been in operation since 1995. It has become more all-embracing in recent years and strives also to be a science-policy interface. Inevitably, it covers some ground also covered by the IPCC, IPBES and the putative ISP-CWP. GEO operates a more flexible approach, offering continuing assessment processes with regular reporting to provide updates on the changing environmental situation, the effectiveness of policy actions, and the policy pathways that can ensure a more sustainable future, with increasing focus on using a full range of knowledges.

How can this be made more efficient and this effective?

Clustering of the chemicals conventions was achieved relatively easily, resulting in considerable savings on efforts. Schally has alluded to the desirability of clustering the " biodiversity regime" to replicate the practical synergies achieved in the chemicals and waste cluster - to avoid missed outcomes during a critical decade for nature. Should such clustering occur, there would be argument for greater synergy, if not fusion, between science-policy bodies.

Given the urgency of the polycrisis, time is of the essence; there are several possible ways co-operation between the bodies can be enhanced without full clustering. Such cooperation can lead to products that are policy-helpful, rather than simply policy-relevant, using, rejuvenating, and refining structures already agreed and in place, without damaging and time-consuming reorganisations. UNEP, through its GEO work and with guidance from the UNEA, is certainly well placed to foster and manage such cooperative arrangements.

- **Firstly**, given the strength of links between Climate change, biodiversity, food, water and human health demonstrated in the IPBES nexus report (ref), the biodiversity-related convention liaison group (BLG) should be strengthened by the addition of UNFCCC, UNCCD, FAO, WHO and UNESCO and meet regularly (at least 6 monthly) at the secretariat level.
- **Secondly**, Chairs of the Scientific Advisory Bodies of the biodiversity-related conventions (CSAB) originally met as a sub-group of the BLG. However, CSAB met only five times before disbanding due to lack of resources, leaving coordination efforts solely to the secretariats. To ensure full co-ordination and buy-in from government, CSAB should be regenerated, and expanded to include the Chairs of the subsidiary bodies of UNFCCC, UNCCD, and the of the bureaux of IPCC, IPBES, ISP-CWP and GEO, with this group chaired by Deputy Executive Secretary of UNEP. This body should resolve overlaps and duplication and highlight crucial upcoming knowledge needs.
- **Thirdly**, continuous reporting should be adopted as the norm by all assessment bodies, with CSAB being the body that shapes the direction of assessments, with the concurrence of the plenaries of each organisation involved. GEO could supply horizon-scanning/Foresight to enable this work.
- **Fourthly**, the rationale for continued production of "outlooks" from conventions must be questioned, with efforts directed towards developing one key source of knowledge to assist policy development and implementation.

UN80 enables an opportunity to address how best science can support the Triple Environmental Crisis. Adopting these four strategies would decrease duplication, improve the quality and information in the assessment products, without upsetting the existing frameworks and systems that have been in place over a range of time periods. This would also allow fusion and regrouping at a pace and direction that plenary members are comfortable with, without losing momentum. It can also help the UN system deliver transformative change as outlined in the IPBES Transformative change report (IPBES 2024b), and in the context of UN80.

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UN80 - IS IT TIME FOR THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE GLOBAL MINISTERIAL ENVIRONMENT FORUM?

By Jan-Gustav Strandenaes

"We shall have to do more with less" was the summary message from a meeting in Oslo, Norway, this spring (2025), where the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, Mr. Espen Barth Eide and Mr. Guy Ryder, Under-Secretary-General for Policy at the UN and Chair of UN80, both spoke about UN80 and the necessity to reform the UN[iv]. The UN80 initiative is, according to Antonio Guterres, SG of the UN, "a system-wide push to streamline operations, sharpen impact, and reaffirm the UN's relevance for a rapidly changing world".[v]

"We will come out of this process with a stronger, fit-for-purpose UN, ready for the challenges the future will undoubtedly bring us," Mr. Ryder has said.[vi] The precarious financial situation of the UN family has, however, led many to say that these nice words are euphemisms for a dramatic UN reform, fearing a necessary downscaling of many of its important activities.

This article builds on previous articles on clustering around the Triple Planetary Crisis of pollution (see How Clustering Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Bring Multiple Benefits to the Environment by Michael Stanley Jones), climate change (see UN 80: Clustering the Climate Change Conventions by Stacey Azores), and biodiversity loss (see Towards Enhancing Synergies among Biodiversity-Related MEAs: Addressing Fragmentation with Strategic Coordination. Clustering biodiversity conventions by Hugo-Maria Schally) and most recently, the article on the possibility of clustering the three science bodies (see Better Use of the World's Expertise in Navigating the Polycrisis by Peter Bridgewater and Rakhyun Kim).

The UN 80 process enables us to look at some of the history of the UN Environment Programme and how to make it more "agile, integrated, and equipped to respond to today's complex global challenges."[vii] A historic lens is needed, and it would be wise to see if elements of this history can be resurrected and a debate around them can be reenergized to accomplish the goals of the present reform process.

[iv] From the author's own notes, he participated in this meeting
[v] From UN80 website: https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en
[vi] Ibid
[vii] Ibid

The institutional constraints of UNEP

Where is UNEP in all this? UNEP is a Programme under the UN General Assembly, UNGA, one of the Charter Bodies. As such, any change in UNEP's structure and status has to be recognised by the UNGA. The UNGA has the power to directly affect UNEP's work, as well as the outcomes of the UN Environment Assembly, UNEA, even though UNEA is also a body with universal membership.

What was the Global Ministerial Environment Forum?

There is no positive and tangible results without continuity. Since its inception, UNEP has been run by the Governing Council, GC, which consisted of 54 member states elected for a three year period. The GC met in Nairobi every two years, effectively diminishing UNEP's role as a consistent guardian of environmental issues, at least at the political level.

As environmental problems increased over the years, there was an increasing need for more continuous political decision-making to meet and solve environmental issues, and the Global Ministerial Environment Forum, the GMEF, was established, among others, in order to answer to this challenge.

Conceived as a Special Session, the 6th since the founding of UNEP, the first GMEF took place in the city of Malmö in Sweden in the year 2000. It was hailed as a success, for several reasons.[viii] One notable aspect was that 73 Ministers of Environment attended and engaged in various debates, including exerting political leadership. Even though 73 member states attended with their environment ministers – the highest ever at the time at an international conference – it is well to remember that the UN then consisted of 189 member states. A significant outcome document was the Malmoe Declaration, which outlines in no uncertain terms the environmental challenges, that UNEP was the preeminent global organisation on environmental issues and that there is an urgent need for UNEP and all stakeholders to engage and work to safeguard the environment[ix].

UNEP, with increasing knowledge in the environment, is still lacking in authority

Knowledge and understanding of environmental issues grow constantly and makes clear to all its inherent complexity, resulting in new and sometimes divergent environmental themes demanding new political approaches.

On the verge of the 21st Century, and sensing new and dramatically different challenges, the then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, outlined these challenges in his report to the UN GA in 2000, called "We the peoples: The role of the UN in the 21st Century." Here, he called for a Millennium Ecosystem Assessment to be delivered[x]. New environmental issues were identified, and the multitude of these issues was another reason for establishing the GMEF in 2000. There was a need to try to develop policy coherence.

The second GMEF was held in Cartagena, Colombia, in February 2002, and nearly 100 Ministers of Environment attended[xi]. Again, the presence of Ministers proved advantageous

[viii] https://enb.iisd.org/events/6th-special-session-unep-governing-council-and-3rd-global-ministerial-environment-forum-3
[ix] UN Digital Library: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/666264?ln=en
[x] https://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/About.html
[xi] https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/11331/K0260448_E_GcssVii-Proceedings.pdf. Note – in the report, the meeting is referred to as the 7th Special Session, which is formally correct, but it

to the deliberations and outcome results. This conference also became an important informal preparatory meeting for the upcoming World Summit for Sustainable Development, WSSD, to be held later that year in Johannesburg. The delegates at this GMEF emphasised the importance of this forum, and the proposal to organise a GMEF in odd years and not in Nairobi was tabled and agreed to. Annual high-level conferences on the environment were agreed as a necessity. Another interesting proposal tabled was that membership in the GMEF should be universal, an idea that took ten years to materialise. It was not until Rio+20 in 2012 that universal membership at a UN body dealing with environmental policies, the UNEA, was agreed to.

The 11th Governing Council and Global Ministerial Environment Forum was held in Nusa Dua, Indonesia in 2010. A simultaneous extraordinary Conference of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, three Multilateral Environmental Agreements, was held back-to-back with the GC/GMEF.[xii] The conference had an overarching objective of enhancing cooperation and coordination and improving synergies in multilateral environmental agreements. As one report states, the meeting broke new ground and set an example of resource-saving coherence among MEAs and perhaps even within the UN system.[xiii]

Without a seemingly proper analysis of the benefit of annual meetings, the GC/GMEF processes were discontinued with the adoption of the UN Environment Assembly, the UNEA, which held its first session in 2014, and the process was back to high level environment meetings every second year. As the UNEAs were to be held every other year, this decision actually lost the continuity which had been established with the GC/GMEF process. With the increasing environmental challenges, not the least their complexity, maybe the time has now come to reinstitute annual UN environmental conferences and use the model which was established by the GC/GMEF process – every other year in Nairobi, and the intermittent year in a capital of a member state.

Strengthening UNEP and UNEA by re-establishing the GMEF.

If we re-establish the GMEF and combine it with the UNEAs, we would accomplish a continuity of high-level political and policy-oriented meetings for the environment. The UNEA would, if this were to take place, continue as it is presently organised, but the GMEF would be different. Two UN entities would play centre-stage: The MEAs and the Science-Policy Interfaces

UNEP has been designated by the governing bodies of eight MEAs, to provide secretariat functions to those conventions. This host relationship established with UNEP means that UNEP is providing administrative and financial support for each secretariat to carry out its responsibilities.[xiv]

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was the second Global Ministerial Environment Forum, GMEF after the first GMEF in Malmoe, Sweden in 2000

[xii] https://enb.iisd.org/unepgc/unepss11/

[xiii] https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n10/426/14/pdf/n1042614.pdf#page=33

[xiv] https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/why-does-un-environment-matter/secretariats-and-conventions

UNEP has, for a long time, been at the forefront of scientific research on environmental issues. Three Science Policy systems have been established and receive support from UNEP.[xv]

The oldest is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, established in 1988. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, the IPBES, is less known to the outer world compared to IPCC. It began functioning in 2014 with a secretariat based in Bonn.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution, ISP-CWP, is a new, independent intergovernmental body established to strengthen the global science-policy interface. It began its official existence in June this year (2025).

What could the agenda for the Forum be? It would have to complement and support the upcoming UN Environment Assembly. There would also be other overarching thematic priorities – the Triple Planetary Crises, the current Medium-Term Strategy and the Programme of Work.

The GMEF could be a place where the three established clusters of MEAs, focusing on pollution (chemicals and waste), biodiversity, and climate change, could meet to address synergies, gaps, and potential areas for collaboration. The MEAs could identify relevant work of a common nature that exists between the conventions and explore interlinkages between them. All this could be informed by the first day of a GMEF when the three science bodies could have identified and presented crucial environmental issues to be solved.

As the meeting would take place midway between the HLPF, the outcome report could also deal with the environmental elements of the SDGs to be dealt with by the next HLPF.

This proposed agenda involves clustering around themes of the Triple Planetary Crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change, ideas, and implementation across science and environmental governance to influence political priorities.

As the GMEF would begin with presentations by the three science bodies outlining urgent issues relating to the Triple Planetary Crises[xvi], their presentations could inform the discussions throughout the week but also support any member state in their negotiations at the GMEF as all stakeholders would discuss common problems. Focus of a systemic nature could be on the inherent inefficiencies in the use of financial resources, the MEAs could look at inconsistencies in the international legal systems, they all could discuss functional inefficiencies, but most importantly, identify their failures to address interlinkages.

When “forced by a common agenda”, they would all have to focus their priorities on the same themes and thus cluster their input.

An example of an area addressed by the three clusters together could be that of nitrogen, currently under discussion, which exemplifies a cross-cutting theme that could challenge all the UN units mentioned here to explore their approach to addressing it. And if all are assembled in a five-day conference, that could quite possibly happen.

Could such a meeting be financed? The old GMEF was partly financed by the hosting city and country. These cities gave generous grants to the conference, knowing full well that

[xv] https://www.unep.org/topics/environmental-law-and-governance/environmental-policy/science-policy-interface
[xvi] https://www.unep.org/resources/global-foresight-report

they would earn tenfold in return as a consequence of participation from 193 member states delegations coming to their city.

The best outcome for UNEP in UN80

UNEP and UNEA lack proper funding, but perhaps its biggest weakness, which hampers its many efforts to be the preeminent global environment organisation, is UNEP's lack of authority and political status. This is perhaps the major reason that hampers its efforts to improve its own system.

Substantial improvements in its internal institutional system will always be difficult as long as UNEP is merely a programme under the General Assembly. The GA's own rules of procedure, its standing in the UN system, and its geographical placement in New York, makes it the key organisational body of the UN, which, by its own position in the UN hierarchy, also makes it a rigid organisation. Whereas UNEP hosts delegations from ministries of the environment, the UNGA delegations are from ministries of foreign affairs.

These ministries address environmental problems in different ways. Whereas foreign offices are among the most important government entities in a country and have, by and large, a generalist understanding and competence on environmental issues, environmental ministries have environmental expertise but are weak in terms of political clout. During the last two decades, environment ministries have also suffered a serious reduction of political influence in several countries, and a few have even been closed down[xvii].

UN80 can start the process of finishing the work of Klaus Toepfer and Achim Steiner, two former Executive Directors at UNEP, on clustering the biodiversity conventions, and if UNFCCC comes under UNEP, it will provide an opportunity for a cluster on climate change. The creation of a more coordinated and effective science platform will help member states to have the right information and address the environmental issues they raise in a coordinated way.

By focusing on conventions under UNEP management, we gain a more coherent approach, albeit one that does not cover all relevant conventions, but one that will have a greater impact on addressing the Triple Planetary Crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. The proof of concept for the chemicals and waste cluster successfully carried out at the 11th GMEF in 2010 should show us the way.

The re-establishment of the Global Environmental Ministers Forum enables member states at a high level to address the interlinkages, gaps and work programmes of the three established clusters. Wouldn't it be great to have this ready for 2030, when we will address the future approach to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? A stronger UNEP has been the vision for many people for a long time. UN80 enables the chance to make that a reality.

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[xvii] https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/18/devastating-consequences-as-new-swedish-government-scraps-environment-ministry

For decades, Jan-Gustav has delivered projects for the United Nations Environment Programme on stakeholder engagement issues and had assignments for UNDESA, one of which had him coordinating civil society input for the entire Rio+20 process, the open working group for the Sustainable Development Goals, and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

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