



A Series of Governance Papers by Stakeholder Forum, Focusing on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Triple Planetary Crisis

Paper 1: UN80 - Is it time to renew the idea of clustering the environmental conventions?

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.

References

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The Authors

*Felix Dodds is an adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina's Water Institute and a consultant advising stakeholders on United Nations engagement. 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.*

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 HLPF processes.

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Registered Offices: 2 The Links • Herne Bay • Kent • CT6 7GQ • UK • tel. +44 (0) 1227 373271
KVK-nummer 78620813 • Roggekamp 619 • 2592XB The Hague • NL
DOS ID 3976706 501 (c) (3) • the State of New York • e: info@stakeholderforum.org