



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

Paper 3: 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.

The Author

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 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.

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