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

Paper 4: UN80 – Clustering the Climate Conventions

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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 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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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.