



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

Paper 5: 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 today's 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), that 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 a lack of resources, leaving coordination efforts solely to the secretariats. To ensure full coordination 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 the 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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IPBES 2024a Summary for Policymakers of the Thematic Assessment Report on the Interlinkages among Biodiversity, Water, Food, and Health of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13850289>.

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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.

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