



Stakeholder Forum
for a sustainable future

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Paper 9: The Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC) as a Case Study for EMG Reform Under the UN80 Process: Lessons Learned and Opportunities for Change

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Introduction and Institutional Origins

The United Nations system has, over several decades, developed multiple coordination mechanisms to address the inherently cross-cutting nature of environmental and chemicals/wastes/pollution-related governance. Two of the most relevant arrangements in this regard are the [Environment Management Group \(EMG\)](#) and the [Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals \(IOMC\)](#). While both seek to enhance coherence across institutions, they originate from distinct legal and institutional pathways and have evolved with markedly different ways of working.

The EMG was established by [General Assembly resolution 53/242 \(1999\)](#) as part of a broader effort to strengthen system-wide coherence following recommendations of the Secretary-General.

The resolution establishing the EMG reads, in part, “Supports the proposal of the Secretary-General regarding the establishment of an environmental management group for the purpose of enhancing inter-agency coordination in the field of environment and human settlements, and requests the Secretary-General to develop, in consultation with the Member States and members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, the mandate, terms of reference, appropriate criteria for membership and flexible, cost-effective working methods of the proposed environmental management group and to submit them to the General Assembly for consideration at its fifty-fourth session;” (UNGA, 1999).

The EMG was conceived as a coordination mechanism across the United Nations system, with a mandate to enhance inter-agency collaboration on environment and human settlements. Its authority is thus derived from a top-down intergovernmental decision, with UNEP serving as chair and secretariat provider. The EMG’s role has remained facilitative, relying on voluntary cooperation among participating entities and lacking independent normative or programmatic authority.

By contrast, the IOMC was established in 1995 through a Memorandum of Understanding among participating organizations. Its origins lie in the implementation of [Agenda 21](#), in particular Chapter 19 on the environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals. With the endorsement by the UN General Assembly of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the Rio

Summit in general in March, 1993ⁱ, relevant UN organizations and the OECD were given the clear mandate to take action, resulting in the formation of the IOMC.

This inter-agency initiative, created by technical organizations themselves to improve coordination in a defined sector, has successfully enhanced coordination and cooperation on chemicals, waste and pollution issues (the “third pillar” of the Triple Planetary Crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and waste) to the present day. Its mandate is grounded in practical cooperation: harmonizing tools, aligning methodologies, preventing needless overlap and duplication and supporting countries in implementing chemicals-related commitments.

These differing origins—intergovernmental mandate versus inter-agency agreement—have had lasting implications for the effectiveness and operational character of each mechanism. At a time when the United Nations system is considering reforms under the “UN80” process, which for the environment is [work package 27](#), this includes adjustments to the EMG and its recent relocation from Geneva to Nairobi, a structured comparison with the IOMC offers a useful, evidence-based case study for institutional design.

IOMC-EMG comparison table of key criteria

Criterion	IOMC	EMG
Institutional origin and mandate	Established in 1995 by a Memorandum of Understanding among participating organizations. The MOU expressly establishes the IOMC and defines its purpose as promoting coordination of policies and activities, jointly and separately, to achieve the sound management of chemicals in relation to human health and the environment. Its mandate comes directly from Agenda 21, chapter 19, and the follow-up to the 1994 International Conference on Chemical Safety.	Established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/242 (1999), following the Secretary-General’s report on environment and human settlements. The EMG is described as a UN system-wide coordination body on environment and human settlements.
Scope	Thematic and sector-specific: chemicals management, with coordination areas including international assessment of chemical risks; harmonization of classification and labelling; information exchange; risk reduction; capacity-building; and prevention of illegal international traffic in toxic and dangerous products. Scope has subsequently expanded to cover most issues related to chemicals, waste and pollution.	Broad and system-wide: environment and human settlements across the UN system, including issues that warrant cooperation and coherent management responses.

ⁱ UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/47/190, 16 March, 1993

Participation	Limited (by agreement) to a defined group of participating organizations, currently including FAO, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, UNIDO, UNITAR, WHO, the World Bank, OECD, Basel/Rotterdam/Stockholm (BRS) Secretariat. Other international and intergovernmental organizations may join with unanimous consent. (The Minamata Convention Secretariat is apparently in the process of joining).	Broad UN-system membership. The EMG website describes membership as consisting of 51 specialized agencies, programmes and organs of the UN, including MEA secretariats.
Governance body	Governed through the Inter-Organization Coordinating Committee (IOCC), composed of one representative from each participating organization. The chair rotates between participating organizations on a regular basis. The IOCC may invite observers and establish advisory bodies.	Chaired by the UNEP Executive Director (no rotation of the chair) and supported by a UNEP-provided secretariat. It works through technical meetings, Issue Management Groups and task forces.
Decision-making	Consensus-based among representatives of participating organizations present at IOCC meetings.	Operates by inter-agency cooperation and consensus practice; its authority depends primarily on institutional buy-in rather than binding direction.
Modus operandi	Regular coordination among participating organizations, including twice-yearly meetings, information exchange, review of gaps and overlaps, recommendations on division of labour, endorsement of joint activities, and encouragement of joint programmes.	Identification of environmental issues warranting cooperation; use of Issue Management Groups and task forces; production of system-wide reports, mappings and common approaches on selected themes.
Secretariat	The MOU provides for a roughly 1.5 person secretariat guided by the IOCC. It organizes meetings, prepares documents, circulates reports, undertakes intersessional work, and prepares draft budgets. The MOU initially located the secretariat at the administering organization, originally the WHO. UNITAR hosts the IOMC Secretariat at present.	Supported by a 4-person secretariat provided by UNEP. Recently relocated to Nairobi, ostensibly as part of the UN80 reform process.

Financing and costs	The MOU provides that participating organizations share the costs of the secretariat, taking into account voluntary monetary and in-kind contributions, secondments and other approved resources. No participating organization is required to provide financial support beyond what it has pledged. Current base contributions are 10,000 USD per participating organization per annum, although some POs provide their contribution in-kind.	EMG is supported through UNEP-provided secretariat arrangements and trust-fund mechanisms. UNEP documentation refers to a general trust fund to establish the EMG secretariat at International Environment House, Geneva, but comparable public information on full EMG costs is less readily visible.
Outputs	Produces coordination through practical instruments: common approaches, joint programming, technical guidance, implementation support and both through regular reporting of activities and alignment of participating organizations' work. Its value lies in supporting countries through tools that can be applied operationally.	Produces system-wide reports, mappings, Issue Management Group outputs and common approaches. These can be useful, but follow-up depends heavily on participating entities incorporating them into their own programmes and reporting lines.
Relationship with Member States	Indirect. IOMC is an inter-organization mechanism, not an intergovernmental body. Its outputs serve Member States through participating organizations and relevant chemicals frameworks. Each participating organization maintains its own reporting relationship with Member States via their own governance structures.	More directly linked to Member State authority through its General Assembly origin and UNEP's intergovernmental governance structures, but the EMG itself remains a coordination mechanism rather than a Member State negotiating body.
Relationship with MEAs and technical bodies	Works in a sector where treaty bodies, technical panels and implementation mechanisms already exist. Its role is to align agency support and avoid duplication, not to substitute for legal mandates under chemicals and waste instruments or other activities mandated under their own individual governance structures.	Includes MEA secretariats among its membership and is positioned to identify system-wide environmental coherence issues. However, its breadth creates a risk of shallow treatment or duplication unless boundaries are clear.
Main strengths	Clear thematic focus; technically engaged membership; defined coordination functions; practical orientation; relatively	System-wide legitimacy; broad membership; formal link to UN environmental

	low institutional weight; ability to align activities among organizations with direct chemicals, waste and pollution mandates.	coordination; ability to convene across sectors and agencies; potential to address cross-cutting issues that no single MEA or agency can resolve.
Main weaknesses	Limited political visibility; no direct relationship with Member States; dependent on voluntary cooperation and pledged resources; sector-specific and not designed to address the full environmental agenda.	Broad scope can dilute focus; incentives for participation may be uneven; outputs may remain advisory; budget and performance transparency may be limited; effectiveness depends on voluntary uptake by agencies. A UNEP-heavy (secretariat comprised of all UNEP staff and reports to the Executive Director of UNEP).
Institutional geography	Geneva location has practical advantages for chemicals and waste governance, given the presence of the BRS Conventions, Minamata Convention, WHO, ILO, UNECE, UNITAR, BRS Secretariat, and related networks and secretariats (e.g., Minamata Convention Secretariat, whose joining is apparently in process).	Historically, Geneva-based, according to current public EMG materials. Relocation to Nairobi may align the EMG more closely with UNEP headquarters (possibly a further weakness) but could reduce daily interaction with Geneva- and New York-based environmental treaty machinery.
Lessons for UN80 reform	IOMC provides a model of pragmatic, technically grounded, low-bureaucracy coordination with a clear work domain and defined division-of-labour functions.	EMG provides a system-wide platform with stronger formal legitimacy but weaker operational specificity. Strengthening EMG as a focus for reform under UN80 is a major, positive opportunity.

Functional comparison: coordination in practice

The EMG operates as a system-wide platform, bringing together a wide range of entities with diverse mandates. Its breadth is both its defining strength and its principal constraint. While it provides a forum for dialogue and information exchange, it has historically struggled to translate this convening role into sustained, programmatic outputs or measurable system-wide alignment. It has been engaged with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, providing the UN system perspective in delivering the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals for member states. EMG Issue Management Groups (IMGs) have produced useful analytical outputs, but these have not consistently driven operational change across agencies.

The IOMC, by contrast, is narrower in scope but deeper in function. Focused specifically on chemicals, waste and pollution management issues, it has enabled participating organizations to develop shared tools (for example, classification systems), coordinate capacity-building initiatives, and align technical guidance. Its outputs are often directly usable by countries and institutions. The programme has also demonstrated continuity, with stable participation, growth over time to include additional organizations, including key convention secretariats, and a clear division of labour among members.

Three structural differences are particularly relevant:

(a) **Mandate specificity:** The IOMC operates within a clearly defined thematic domain, allowing for technical depth and cumulative progress. The EMG's system-wide mandate, while politically important, diffuses focus and complicates prioritization.

(b) **Ownership and incentives:** The IOMC is, at its core, an “enabling framework” for its participating organizations, which have direct technical and programmatic stakes in its outputs. The outputs, in fact, are “owned” by the participating organizations, not by the IOMC itself. With the EMG, participation is broader, but incentives are weaker, as outputs are not systematically linked to agencies' core mandates or budgets.

(c) **Output orientation:** The IOMC has enabled the development, by its participating organizations, of tangible products and joint programmes. The EMG has remained more process-oriented, with less emphasis on implementation.

Relevance to current reform discussions

The ongoing UN80 reform process has reopened questions regarding the effectiveness, location, and mandate of system-wide coordination mechanisms. In this context, the recent relocation of the EMG secretariat from Geneva to Nairobi warrants careful consideration.

The decision to move EMG to Nairobi might have benefited from discussions with member states. Geneva has historically functioned as a central hub for environmental governance, hosting a dense concentration of multilateral environmental agreements, technical bodies, and diplomatic missions. Proximity to these institutions has facilitated informal coordination, rapid engagement with negotiators, and access to specialized expertise.

This shift underscores a broader issue: coordination mechanisms derive much of their effectiveness not only from formal mandates but also from institutional geography, network density, and access to decision-making processes. The IOMC experience suggests

that proximity to technical expertise and sustained engagement with implementing institutions are critical success factors.

The [EMG mandate](#) could therefore be better focused to help deliver more across the UN system.

Considerations for reform: lessons from the IOMC

Drawing on the IOMC case, we put forward several considerations to consider, which are apparent, for the reform of the EMG:

a) Continue to prioritize specific domains for further cooperation/development

The EMG would benefit from a more clearly defined operational focus. While maintaining its system-wide mandate, it should continue to prioritize specific cross-cutting domains (e.g., chemicals and pollution, climate-biodiversity linkages) where coordination gaps are most acute and where measurable outcomes can be achieved.

b) Strengthening output orientation

The EMG could shift from a primarily convening role toward identifying joint analytical and programmatic outputs. This may include (resources permitting) system-wide assessments, coordinated guidance, or joint initiatives aligned with intergovernmental priorities.

c) Enhancing institutional incentives

Participation in EMG activities should be primarily aimed at raising further awareness for action among those agencies that do not necessarily have key environment-related issues as part of their core mandates and reporting frameworks. This could involve closer coordination of EMG outputs with the agendas of relevant governing bodies of EMG members or aligning them with system-wide strategies (e.g., SDG implementation).

d) Complementing the huge body of technical work by the system

The EMG should further complement, at a higher level, the work of specialized bodies, in order to quicken the pace of environment-related change in the overall UN system. It should function as a platform that aggregates and translates their outputs into system-wide insights, similar to how the IOMC builds on the technical work of its member organizations - but with a mandate for adjusting mandates accordingly and engaging and gaining endorsements of such activities at the highest levels in the system.

e) Established at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, UN Water, UN Energy, and UN Oceans are interagency coordinating mechanisms.

At present, they report to the Secretary-General's Chief Executive Board (CEB) through the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP). Adding a formal focus/role for EMG in addition to the HLCP regarding the work of UN Water, UN Energy, and UN Oceans, could there be additional funds through EMG to promote collaborative work and projects for these interagency groups?

f) Addressing geographic and network considerations

With the EMG now in Nairobi, there should be consideration of placing staff in the UNEP regional office for Europe, given the importance of institutional proximity, mechanisms

should be established to maintain strong operational linkages with Geneva. The EMG remains active in New York-based processes through the UNEP New York Office regardless of the EMG's formal location.

g) Addressing reporting lines, budget, and staffing

EMG is currently fully UNEP-led. This is both a strength and a weakness. Closely examining how the IOMC operates can illuminate the advantages of possibly re-jigging reporting lines, chairing, budgetary contributions and secretariat staffing for EMG. Funding should also come from other EMG members.

This hybrid secretariat could better ensure a regular presence in Geneva and New York, or structured engagement with convention secretariats and diplomatic missions.

Conclusions and recommendations

The comparison between the EMG and the IOMC illustrates that effective coordination within the United Nations system depends less on formal mandate alone than on clarity of function, strength of institutional incentives, and the capacity to deliver tangible outputs.

Considering the above, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration by Member States:

Reaffirm and refine the EMG mandate

Member States may wish to reaffirm the EMG's role as the principal system-wide environmental coordination mechanism, while requesting a more focused work programme with clearly defined priority areas and deliverables.

Mandate a flagship system-wide output

The General Assembly could request the EMG to produce a biennial system-wide assessment of environmental governance coherence, drawing on inputs from across the UN system. This would provide a concrete output around which coordination can be structured. This would also be a report to UNEA, so the timing would be linked.

Enhance linkages with specialized mechanisms

The EMG could be explicitly tasked with building structured linkages with existing technical coordination mechanisms, including those operating in specific sectors such as chemicals. This would avoid duplication and leverage existing expertise.

Address implications of relocation

To strengthen EMG's delivery of its mandate, Member States may wish to request an assessment of the operational implications of the EMG's relocation to Nairobi, including its impact on engagement with Geneva, Vienna, and New York-based processes, and to consider measures to mitigate any identified disadvantages. Moving EMG to a location where there is, in essence, only one major entity (UNEP) that already has an environmental focus at its core, when the overall UN system needs to have environmental issues coordinated and strengthened across all agencies, is at cross-purposes with its mandate.

Promote a results-oriented coordination culture

Finally, reform efforts should emphasize a shift toward measurable outcomes, drawing on the IOMC model of practical cooperation, joint outputs, and sustained institutional engagement.

Taken together, these measures would enable the EMG to significantly strengthen its core functions to enable it to be a more effective instrument for system-wide coherence, better aligned with the scale and complexity of contemporary environmental challenges.

Re-jig reporting lines; share coordination and budgetary responsibilities; and rotate in staff from member agencies on a regular basis

EMG staff and activities presently report to the Executive Director of UNEP. Consideration could be made to shift reporting (as a reflection of the need for EMG to serve the entire UN system) to the UN Secretary General, or, failing that, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). Either option immediately broadens the accountability of EMB. Alternatively, a form of co-reporting both to the UNEP ED *and* the SG or CEB could be considered (as could regular reporting to the General Assembly *and* UNEA). **Secondly**, chairing of the EMG -as is allowed in its mandate - could, à la IOMC, be rotated on a regular basis or, like UN Water, elected for a term agreed by EMG members among member organizations. This could greatly improve ownership over its decisions.

Also, similar to IOMC, direct budgetary contributions could also be made by each entity. Failing that, or complementary to that, a series of rotating secondments of staff from member organizations to the EMG secretariat could also take place, thereby strengthening its capacities for action.

Annex

EMG members: <https://unemg.org/about-emg/emg-members/>

IOMC members: <https://iomc.info/participating-organizations>

References

- h) UN General Assembly (1999) UNGA 53/242. Report of the Secretary-General on environment and human settlements, UN

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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