



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

Paper 2: The experience of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions shows how clustering Multilateral Environmental Agreements brings multiple benefits to the Environment

By Michael Stanley-Jones

The UN80 Initiative, unveiled in March by Secretary-General António Guterres, is a system-wide effort to “reaffirm the UN’s relevance for a rapidly changing world.”ⁱ The Initiative comes at a time of brutal budget cuts across the UN system.ⁱⁱ The United Nations High Commission for Refugees is cutting 3,500 jobs and making reductions in senior positions and offices to manage budget shortfalls. The World Health Organisation is expected to cut 20-25% of its global staff. Cuts at The World Food Programme range up to 30%.

And yet the needs served by the United Nations remain stark. The UN appealed for US\$29 billion in funding for the Global Humanitarian Overview 2025 to assist nearly 180 million vulnerable people, including refugees, in December 2024. Near the midpoint of the year, just \$5.6 billion - less than 13 per cent - had been received.

Facing this harsh fiscal environment, the Secretary-General established seven thematic clusters under the UN80 Initiative covering peace and security, humanitarian action, development (Secretariat and UN system), human rights, training and research, and specialised agencies to improve coordination, reduce fragmentation, and realign functions where needed.

The UN80 Task Force is scheduled to release its recommendations at the end of July.

In their timely opinion piece, “UN Reform: Is it Time to Renew the Idea of Clustering the Major Environmental Agreements?”, Felix Dodds and Chris Spence advocate for “clustering key conventions and bringing scientific bodies to strengthen international environmental governance, while also offering potential cost savings.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ United Nations (June 23, 2025). [UN80 Initiative: What it is - and why it matters to the world | UN News](#).

ⁱⁱ United Nations (June 16, 2025). [Brutal cuts mean brutal choices warns UN relief chief, launching ‘survival appeal’](#). UN News.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

“Currently, there are hundreds of different multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) in force, but perhaps only 20-30 core global MEAs with broad international participation,” Dodds and Spence write.

Bringing the fragmented set of environmental conventions together in clusters to address the interconnected issues they address could strengthen their work, reduce inefficiencies, and fill significant gaps in how the UN approaches the triple planetary crises of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution.

There is one experience that suggests how such a clustering of MEA secretariats could be accomplished. In 2009, on an *ad interim* basis, the Joint Convention Services of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions was set up, preparatory to a decision by an extraordinary conference of the parties of the three chemicals and wastes conventions to establish a joint Secretariat in February 2010.

I was hired as the first staff member assigned to serve the three conventions equally in December 2009, holding the position of Public Information Officer in the Rotterdam Convention Secretariat while acting on behalf of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions until August 2014. This gave me a ringside view of the process of “synergies” between the three clustered conventions.

My assignment covered media relations, public information and outreach, including helping manage the joint conventions’ synergies website. The first lesson drawn from the experience of what we called “the synergies process” was that public information provided a fertile ground for joint activity between the three independent conventions.

A more important lesson concerns how the groundwork was successfully laid for the establishment of a joint ‘BRS’ Secretariat. The process needs to be owned and embraced by the Parties to the Conventions themselves. As legally independent entities, they must be the drivers of any envisioned reform.

A country-led working group was established with co-chairpersonship nominated by Parties from the North and South to steer the process. This ensured that the changes would have the political backing of the parties themselves.

A third lesson is that the leadership of the newly formed cluster of conventions’ secretariat needed to be placed in one team. In practice, this meant consolidating the executives of the three conventions (on the UNEP side, as Rotterdam has a joint secretariat shared by UNEP and FAO). Having multiple executives retarded the synergies process. Reducing three executive posts down to one brought coherence as well as significant cost savings. The streamlining of secretariat staff further contributed to creating a more efficient, less costly secretariat.

Such administrative measures brought relatively these minor benefits when placed side-by-side with the larger structural reforms of the synergies process. Future conferences of the Parties (COPs) of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions are now held back-to-back on a biennial schedule.

For the more than 180 governments that attend the ‘SuperCOPs’ the efficiencies gained in time, travel and expense are obvious. The joint nature of the conferences also allows for a greater exchange of information and views between the parties to the conventions,

helping close gaps in implementation and increasing understanding of how the actions of any one MEA impact the others.

Ultimately, this may be the highest benefit clustering of thematically-related instruments can bring to global environmental governance.

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He previously served as an Environmental Affairs Officer at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, within the Aarhus Convention Secretariat from 2004 to 2009. He joined the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as a Public Information Officer with the Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions in 2009 and served as a Programme Management Officer in the UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative / Action for Sustainable Development Goals from 2014 to 2022.

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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