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REPORTING MECHANISMS UNDER THE CONVENTION AND OTHER CONVENTIONS

Note by the Executive Secretary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main role of the Conference of the Parties is to keep under review the implementation of the Convention (Article 23, para. 4). The ability of the Conference of the Parties to fulfil this role has been hampered by the lack of adequate information received from Parties on measures taken to implement the provisions of the Convention and their effectiveness (see also UNEP/CBD/WG-RI/1/3 and Add.1). With the shift in focus of the work of the Conference of the Parties from policy development to implementation, it has become increasingly important that the Conference of the Parties fulfill its role of keeping implementation of the Convention under review, and that it receives the information necessary to carry out this task. Given available (though limited) evidence that most of the bottlenecks in implementation of the Convention exist at national level (see UNEP/CBD/WG-RI/1/2), it is especially important that the essential “feedback loop” of national reporting is made to work.

The submission of national reports on measures taken to implement the provisions of the Convention and their effectiveness is the only unqualified obligation of Parties to the Convention. Yet, to date, compliance with this obligation has generally been incomplete and late. In addition, despite efforts of Parties, the Secretariat and collaborating organizations, and the use of various approaches and formats in the guidelines for the preparation of national reports, the usefulness of the information provided for the purpose of keeping under review the implementation of the Convention by the Conference of the Parties has been limited.

The national reporting experience is further discussed in this note, which describes the following lessons learned:

* UNEP/CBD/WG-RI/1/1.

(a) National reports and the reporting process can serve multiple purposes: helping individual Parties to judge their level of implementation of and compliance with the Convention, and acting as a planning tool; helping the Conference of the Parties evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of its decisions; and raising awareness at all levels. Multiple formats may be needed to meet these multiple purposes;

(b) There are both advantages and disadvantages of free-flow and structured reporting formats, used respectively for the first national reports and for the second and third national reports. Future reporting formats might usefully draw upon the strengths of each approach;

(c) Inadequate time (ranging from eight and a half months to a little over a year) was given to Parties for preparing their first, second and third national reports. Parties could be given more time without extending the interval between reports, through advanced notice and earlier preparation of guidelines;

(d) Some countries indicated that they were late in submitting their national reports primarily due to their limited capacities to collect and process information and data required for reporting. Therefore, proper and timely provision of technical assistance to these countries is important for facilitating the process of report preparation;

(e) Timely and easier access by eligible countries to funding for the preparation of national reports is also crucial to facilitating the reporting process;

(f) There is a need to coordinate reporting requests from various bodies of the Convention and reduce reporting burdens placed on Parties. Requests for thematic reports should be limited to those issues due for in-depth consideration under the Multi-year Programme of Work of the Conference of the Parties;

(g) There is a need for the Conference of the Parties and for individual Parties to make better use of reports. If reports were more widely used, there would be enhanced political will to prepare them.

The note also draws upon lessons from the reporting processes of other conventions, and from the ongoing projects to streamline and harmonize national reporting processes of the biodiversity-related conventions. Based on this combined experience, some options for improving the national reporting process are discussed. These are reflected in the recommendations below.

SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS

The Working Group on Review of Implementation of the Convention may wish to:

1. *Recommend* that the Conference of the Parties:
 - (a) *Recognizes* the need to align the national reporting process with the framework for evaluating implementation of the Convention and progress towards the 2010 target;
 - (b) *Notes* that the Parties listed in annex X 1/ had not completed their third national reports by 15 November 2005, and *urges* those Parties to complete their third national reports expeditiously;
 - (c) *Decides* that the fourth and subsequent national reports should be outcome-oriented and focus on the status and trends of biodiversity, national actions and outcomes with respect to the achievement of the 2010 target and the goals of the Strategic Plan of the Convention; and progress in implementation of national biodiversity strategies and action plans;
 - (d) *Welcomes* the draft guidelines for the fourth national reports 2/ and *requests* the Executive Secretary to finalize these guidelines in the light of the decisions of the eighth meeting of the Conference of the Parties and to make them available to Parties and other Governments by 1 July 2006;
 - (e) *Invites* Parties to make use of these guidelines;
 - (f) *Further decides* that Parties shall submit their fourth national reports by 30 March 2009;
 - (g) *Further invites* Parties that anticipate that they may encounter difficulty in completing their reports according to the date set by the Conference of the Parties to advise the Secretariat in advance.
 - (h) *Decides* to establish a mechanism for the peer-review of national reports, to be applied on a voluntary basis;
 - (i) *Encourages* Parties to submit draft national reports to the review mechanism and, as appropriate, to regional preparatory meetings for the meetings of the Conference of the Parties;
 - (j) *Requests* the Executive Secretary to organize regional and/or subregional workshops to facilitate the preparation of national reports, subject to the availability of the necessary resources, and *invites* funding organizations to provide the necessary resources;
 - (k) *Requests* the Executive Secretary to identify additional ways and means to facilitate timely submission of national reports by Parties, including through providing technical assistance;
 - (l) *Invites* the Global Environment Facility to adopt a regular mechanism for easier and more expeditious provision of funds to eligible countries for preparing their future national reports;
 - (m) *Decides* that Parties will be invited to submit complementary reports on thematic programmes that are due for in-depth review according to the multi-year programme of work of the Conference of the Parties up to 2010. Accordingly, *invites* Parties, on a voluntary basis, to prepare complementary thematic reports according to the schedule in annex I;
 - (n) *Decides* to establish an on-line reporting facility, through the clearing-house mechanism, for use by Parties on a voluntary basis as a planning tool;
 - (o) *Decides* that the third edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook shall be prepared for publication at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties in 2010 and that it shall be based on the fourth national reports as well as other information received on progress towards the 2010 target;

1/ This list is to be compiled on 15 November 2005 - i.e., six months following the deadline for the third national reports established in decision VII/25.

2/ To be developed by the Executive Secretary pursuant to this recommendation.

(p) *Agrees* to base its review of the implementation of the Convention at its tenth meeting primarily on the basis of the fourth national reports as well as the analysis in the third edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook;

(q) *Welcomes* the initiative of the five biodiversity-related Conventions, through the Biodiversity Liaison Group, to:

- (i) Keep each other informed of proposed developments in national reporting under each of the conventions, with a view to aligning approaches where possible;
- (ii) Develop a Webportal with links to reports and guidelines of each of the conventions, similar to the Collaborative Portal on Forests;
- (iii) Develop common reporting modules for specific themes, where possible;

(r) *Encourages* Parties to harmonize the gathering and management of data for the five biodiversity-related conventions at the national level.

2. *Request* the Executive Secretary to develop for consideration by the Conference of the Parties at its eighth meeting:

(a) Draft guidelines for the Fourth National Reports, according to the approach set out in the present document;

(b) Proposals for the peer-review mechanism referred to in paragraph 1(h) above;

3. *Note* the need for Parties to complete their third national reports expeditiously, and *suggest* that particular emphasis might be given to reporting on the progress towards the 2010 target and sub-targets, and the status of implementation of national biodiversity strategies and action plans.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Article 26 of the Convention requires Parties to present reports to the Conference of the Parties on measures that they have taken for the implementation of the provisions of the Convention and their effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the Convention.
2. The mandate of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on the Review of Implementation of the Convention, established by decision VII/30, paragraph 23, is, *inter alia*, to review the impacts and effectiveness of existing processes under the Convention. The Conference of the Parties recognized the need to develop better methods to evaluate progress in the implementation of the Convention, with due consideration given to the experiences of other multilateral environmental agreements (decision VII/30, para. 27) and has previously requested the Executive Secretary to provide an overview of existing mechanisms and processes for review of national implementation of environmental instruments (decision V/20, para. 41). In addition, the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) in its recommendation X/5, invited the Working Group on the Review of Implementation of the Convention to consider the linkages between the process for assessing progress towards the 2010 target (see UNEP/CBD/WG-RI/1/9), including the use of indicators, and national reporting, with a view to streamlining future national reporting.
3. The present note has been prepared to assist the Working Group in its review of the national reporting processes under the Convention and other relevant conventions. Section II presents a review of the national reporting process under the Convention, including lessons learned. Section III reviews the experience of other conventions, while section IV considers the recommendations arising from processes aimed at promoting harmony in reporting among the biodiversity-related conventions. Section V summarizes views of Parties on national reporting as reflected in their submissions on issues to be addressed by the Working Group on Review of Implementation. Drawing on the previous sections, section VI presents some possible options for improving the reporting process.

II. REVIEW OF NATIONAL REPORTING UNDER THE CONVENTION AND LESSONS LEARNED

4. The Conference of the Parties has to date requested Parties to submit three national reports, with the first due at its fourth meeting (by decision II/17), the second requested by 15 May 2001 (decision V/19) and the third by 15 May 2005 (decision VII/25). In addition, in decisions V/19 and VI/25, the Conference of the Parties has invited Parties to submit thematic reports on a number of issues for in-depth consideration at its sixth and seventh meetings.
5. As of the end of June 2005, a total of 140 first national reports and 120 second national reports had been received from a total of 188 Parties. The experience gained and lessons learned through this process are presented in this section.

A. *First round of national reporting*

6. The Conference of the Parties, in decision II/17, decided that the first national reports would be due at its fourth meeting in 1997 (para. 4) ^{3/} and that reports would focus on the measures taken for the implementation of Article 6 of the Convention as well as the information available in national country studies on biological diversity (para. 3). Guidelines were provided in an annex.
7. By the deadline (30 June 1997) specified in decision II/17 (para. 11), only one first national report had been received. The Conference of the Parties, in decision III/9, extended the deadline for submission to 1 January 1998, receiving a total of 11 first national reports by that date. The deadline was again revised (decision IV/14, para. 1), to 31 December 1998, with a total of 94 first national reports received

^{3/} The fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties was actually convened in May 1998.

by the end of that year. By the end of June 2005, a total of 140 first national reports had been received, accounting for 74% per cent of the total number of Parties.

8. The observed very low rate of submission was partly due to the fact that it usually takes a long time for a country to prepare its first national reports, considering the need to collect relevant information and data for the first time, as well as to get relevant institutions and organizations involved in the process. The limited capacities of some developing countries for preparing their national reports were also part of the reason for delayed submission.

9. Another challenge of the first round of reporting under the Convention was the varying scope, size and content of the reports received. Some countries provided very comprehensive reports covering most articles of the Convention (although decision II/17 requested Parties to focus on Article 6) while others submitted reports of a few pages. This might be a reflection of different levels of implementation by different Parties as well as their different capacities for preparing their reports. This variance in size and content posed great difficulty to extracting relevant information from reports for consideration by the meetings of the Conference of the Parties for review of the implementation of the Convention at the national level.

10. Accordingly, when discussing the national reporting process at its fourth meeting, many delegates were of the view that there was a need to develop a uniform reporting format to facilitate the analysis of information provided by different Parties.

11. Therefore, the Conference of the Parties requested SBSTTA to provide it at its fifth meeting with advice on the form of future national reports (decision IV/14, para. 3). Specifically this advice was to cover the nature of the information needed from Parties in order to assess the state of implementation of the Convention; recommendations on improving the reporting process, through guidelines on format, style, length and treatment with a view to ensuring comparability between national reports; and identification of ways and means to further facilitate national implementation of the Convention.

12. Another important issue much debated in the first round of reporting was the interval for reporting under the Convention. In line with decision II/17 (para. 5), the Conference of the Parties addressed this matter at its fourth meeting. Although there was no formal agreement, many delegates agreed that a two-year interval was not sufficient, considering it difficult for many Parties to provide meaningful information within a short period. SBSTTA was requested to provide advice on this matter as well (decision IV/14, para. 4).

B. Second round of national reporting

13. Pursuant to decision IV/14, paragraph 3, the Secretariat developed and pilot tested a standard format for the national report, with the assistance of a number of Parties. The questionnaire contained in the format was developed on the basis of identification of all the actions to be undertaken by Parties for the implementation of the Convention, derived from the provisions of the Convention and from the decisions of the Conference of the Parties.

14. The Conference of the Parties, in its decision V/19, adopted the guidelines for national reports recommended by the fifth meeting of SBSTTA, with a request to the Executive Secretary to further revise the guidelines by incorporating the views expressed at the Conference of the Parties, and to keep the format under review. The Executive Secretary revised the guidelines and distributed the finalized version to Parties in September 2000, as requested.

15. The Conference of the Parties, in paragraph 5 of decision V/19, also requested Parties to submit their reports by 15 May, 2001 and thereafter for consideration at alternate ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Parties (e.g., every four years).

16. By the deadline set in decision V/19, a total of 15 reports had been received. By February 2002, a total of 65 reports had been received and an assessment of information contained in these reports was presented for consideration by the Conference of the Parties at its sixth meeting. By January 2004, a total

of 95 reports had been received and an analysis of information contained in these reports was presented for consideration by the Conference of the Parties at its seventh meeting. As of the end of June 2005, a total of 120 second national reports had been received, accounting for 64 per cent of the total number of Parties.

17. Despite some improvements, the rate of submission of the second national report was still unsatisfactory. This is due in part to the difficulty for some developing country Parties to access funding for preparing their second national reports, and in part to Parties taking some time to familiarize themselves with use of the new reporting format.

18. While recognizing valuable merits of the guidelines for the second national reports adopted at the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, a considerable number of countries provided some suggestions for further improvement in their second national reports, as summarized below:

(a) Some questions are lengthy, vague and complex, and some of them are even unnecessary considering they have little to do with national actions;

(b) Some terms used (such as “adequate” and “to a limited extent”) are open to broad interpretation, and need to be explained or defined;

(c) The responses to some questions require a detailed knowledge of the provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity and are not seen as relevant to day-to-day biodiversity, which makes it difficult to engage the community;

(d) Space should be provided to allow other groups of countries to respond to questions addressed specifically to particular groups of countries, such as some questions relating to genetic resources;

(e) In the text guidelines, requests for additional information should directly follow the question for which the request is made, for easier reference;

(f) The range of optional answers provided to some questions is too narrow or limited.

19. The Open-ended Inter-Sessional Meeting on the Strategic Plan, National Reports and Implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (MSP), held from 19 to 21 November, 2001, reviewed the national reporting process under the Convention and adopted a number of recommendations and decisions for improvements. After considering a preliminary assessment of the information contained in 55 reports received by that time, some delegates voiced concerns similar to those outlined above, and many pointed out that most of the questions included in the guidelines were qualitative and administrative in nature, the responses to which would not provide adequate information for the Conference of the Parties to assess the state of the implementation of the Convention.

C. Development of guidelines for the third national report

20. Based on the recommendations made at the Inter-Sessional Meeting, the Conference of the Parties, in decision VI/25, paragraph 3 (d), requested the Executive Secretary to prepare a draft format for the third national reports, and provided guidance on what the revised format should contain.

21. The Open-ended Inter-Sessional Meeting on the Multi-Year Programme of Work for the Conference of the Parties up to 2010 (MYPOW) held from 17 to 20 March 2003 also addressed issues related to national reporting under the Convention, providing a number of recommendations for consideration by the Conference of the Parties at its seventh meeting. Accordingly, in decision VII/25 A, paragraph 6, the Conference of the Parties requested Parties to submit as much information and data as available to improve the adequacy of information for the evaluation of the implementation of the Convention, the Strategic Plan of the Convention and the progress towards the 2010 target, particularly focusing on:

(a) Status and trends of biodiversity and its various components;

- (b) Impacts of national actions on the achievement of the objectives of the Convention, the goals and objectives identified in the Strategic Plan of the Convention and the 2010 target;
- (c) Implementation of priority actions in national biodiversity strategies and action plans;
- (d) Constraints or impediments encountered in the implementation of the Convention.

22. In developing the draft guidelines for the third national report considered at the seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties, the Secretariat took into consideration the guidance provided by the sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties and the recommendations made at the Inter-Sessional Meeting on the Multi-Year Programme of Work. A few significant improvements are worth highlighting here. First, all of the questions of administrative nature were removed from the reporting format. In addition, many questions were consolidated and redesigned in order to solicit more substantive information from Parties. To address the inadequacy of information, more requests for additional information were added. Second, the questions were designed in a simpler way and the optional answers provided were more carefully designed, limiting room for different interpretation. Thirdly, and most importantly, the reporting format was designed to allow Parties to elaborate on the impacts of their actions as well as their links with progress in implementing national biodiversity strategies and action plans, achieving the goals of the Strategic Plan of the Convention as well as the 2010 target. The reporting format also invited Parties to report on the status and trends of various components of biodiversity and to identify the obstacles encountered in implementation.

23. In adopting the guidelines for the third national report, the Conference of the Parties, in decision VII/25 B, paragraph 3, further requested the Executive Secretary to revise the existing national reporting formats to make them more concise and better targeted to reduce the reporting burden placed on Parties, and to better contribute to the assessment of progress towards achieving the mission of the Strategic Plan and the 2010 target. In addition to the guidance provided in decision VI/25, paragraph 3, the revision of the reporting format should also address: (i) the need to include reporting on all the four goals of the Strategic Plan; (ii) the need to allow Parties to incorporate the results of indicators; and (iii) the need to include available factual data on the outcomes and impacts of measures taken to achieve the objectives of the Convention.

24. The guidelines for the third national report were finalized by the Executive Secretary on 23 July 2004 (as per decision VII/25 B), and posted on the website of the Convention in the six United Nations languages.

25. It should be underlined that extensive consultations were undertaken with Parties in the process of drafting the guidelines prior to the seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties and further developing the guidelines after the seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties. Valuable inputs and suggestions were received from a number of Parties and regional organizations, which were incorporated in the finalized guidelines for the third national report.

26. From the limited responses received after the distribution of the finalized guidelines, some Parties still feel that the current format is complex in design and the reporting burden is heavy, particularly for those developing countries with limited capacities of collecting and processing data and information. More importantly, some Parties were of the view that the reporting format could be further improved to allow Parties to report more on the implementation of national biodiversity strategies and action plans rather than on decisions of the Conference of the Parties and provisions of the Convention.

D. Thematic reporting

27. Another element of the reporting process under the Convention is thematic reporting on specific issues identified in the multi-year programme of work of the Convention for in-depth consideration at meetings of the Conference of the Parties.

28. Decision IV/16 (annex II), identified items for in-depth consideration at the fifth, sixth and seventh meetings of the Conference of the Parties. In decision V/19, the Conference of the Parties invited

Parties to submit thematic reports on access to genetic resources and benefit-sharing, forest ecosystems and alien species. In decision VI/25, the Conference of the Parties requested Parties to provide thematic reports on mountain ecosystems, protected areas and transfer of technology and technology cooperation. In addition, in decision VI/5, Parties were requested to submit thematic reports on agricultural biodiversity as part of the third national report.

29. As of the end of June 2005, the Secretariat had received 16 thematic reports on access to genetic resources and benefit sharing, 46 thematic reports on forest ecosystems, 59 thematic reports on alien species, 39 thematic reports on mountain ecosystems, 55 thematic reports on protected areas and 26 thematic reports on transfer of technology and technological cooperation.

30. These thematic reports proved very useful in terms of providing detailed information in a timely manner on specific issues for consideration by the meetings of SBSTTA and the Conference of the Parties. However, the rate of submission was very low, averaging one fourth or one fifth of the total number of Parties. This was partly due to the increasing reporting burdens which a considerable number of Parties hoped could be reduced through coordination between national and thematic reporting. Another possible reason was that some Parties could not access funds for preparing their thematic reports.

31. In decision VII/31, the multi-year programme of work of the Conference of the Parties was adopted for a period up to 2010, but, so far, additional thematic reports have not been requested.

E. Lessons learned

32. From the above review, it is clear that the number of both national and thematic reports received around the deadline was very small, and that most national reports were received only two or three years after the deadline. In addition the information in the reports was of limited use to the Conference of the Parties in keeping under review the implementation of the Convention. One of the direct impacts of delayed submissions was that the meetings of the Conference of the Parties were provided inadequate information for reviewing or assessing the implementation of the Convention at the national level. Therefore it is advisable that a mechanism, incentives or disincentives be developed by the Conference of the Parties to ensure that national reports will be submitted by the majority of, if not all, Parties in time to make national reporting serve its objective as defined in Article 26 of the Convention.

33. As requested in decision VI/25, the Secretariat organized a survey on the reasons for no or late submission. Based on the limited responses received, reasons included:

- (a) Lack of financial assistance to prepare the national reports;
- (b) Delay caused by lack of or poor coordination with relevant implementing agencies to apply for the funds from the Global Environment Facility;
- (c) Delay caused by lack of or poor coordination at the national level and the limited participatory approach;
- (d) Lack of technical capacity and resources to prepare the report;
- (e) Delay caused by change of personnel responsible for biodiversity and national reporting at the national focal point.

34. There are a number of lessons to be learned from the above review of the reporting process under the Convention.

35. *Lesson one.* The national reports and the reporting process can serve multiple purposes: they can help individual Parties to judge their level of implementation of and compliance with the Convention, and act as a planning tool; they can help the Conference of the Parties to evaluate implementation of the Convention and progress towards the 2010 target, and the effectiveness and impacts of its decisions (including programmes of work, tools and other guidance) and thereby provide the essential “feedback loop” to inform decision making at the global level; and they can also help to raise awareness of

biodiversity and the Convention at all levels. Using different processes or reporting formats, each tailored to specific purposes, may be better than attempting to cover all purposes within a single format.

36. *Lesson two.* There are both advantages and disadvantages to free-flow and structured reporting formats used respectively, for the first, and for the second and third, national reports. Narrative reporting formats allow Parties to be proactive in deciding what is important to report on and also tend to result in more interesting documents. But this type of format tends to generate more variation among the reports submitted and makes comparison difficult. Structured questionnaires, on the other hand, make it easier to generate comparable information between Parties that can be analysed more mechanically. However, such reports tend to be extremely long, questions are often highly subjective and the information generated seems to be of very limited use for assessing the implementation of the Convention. Future reporting formats might usefully draw upon the strengths of both approaches, and avoid the limitations.

37. *Lesson three.* Inadequate time was given to Parties for preparing their national reports. Calculated from the time that reporting guidelines were finalized and their respective deadlines set in relevant decisions of the Conference of the Parties, Parties were given a little over a year for preparing their first reports (although the time allotted was actually longer than this since the deadlines were revised twice by decisions of the Conference of the Parties), eight and a half months for preparing their second national reports, and ten and a half months for preparing their third national reports. This was the case even though the interval between reports has been extended to four years. Given evidence that most Parties take two to three years to prepare their reports, and considering the amount of information needed to include in national reports, it seems advisable that more time be given to Parties for national report preparation. This could be done without extending the interval between reports, by providing earlier notice and preparation of guidelines. (However, it is also possible that given a longer time for report preparation, Parties may not feel the pressing need to submit their reports, which may cause further delays in submission.)

38. *Lesson four.* As indicated by some countries, Parties may be late in submitting their national reports primarily due to their limited capacities to collect and process information and data required for reporting. Therefore, proper and timely provision of technical assistance to these countries is important for facilitating the process of report preparation. One approach to this may be through regional training workshops. Section III above documents additional facilitation approaches used in other conventions.

39. *Lesson five.* Timely and easier access by eligible countries to funding for the preparation of national reports is also crucial to facilitating the reporting process. An encouraging development is the recent step by the Global Environment Facility and some of its implementing agencies (UNEP and UNDP) to use a package proposal approach, which makes fund application and allocation to eligible countries easier and faster. It is hoped that this approach will be adopted by the Global Environment Facility as a regular mechanism for providing funds to preparation of future national reports. More importantly, this process of fund application and allocation could start immediately upon the adoption of the reporting guidelines by the Conference of the Parties, so that Parties could start their preparatory process in time.

40. *Lesson six.* There is a need to coordinate reporting requests from various bodies of the Convention in order to reduce reporting burdens placed on Parties. Though thematic reporting proved very useful in terms of providing detailed, timely information, one important reason for low submission rates of both national and thematic reports is increasing reporting requests from both the recommendations of the SBSTTA and the decisions of the Conference of the Parties. In addition to thematic reports on items for in-depth consideration by the Conference of the Parties, various decisions of the Conference of the Parties have called for additional thematic and voluntary reports on other items not included in the multi-year programme of work of the Conference of the Parties. It is therefore advisable that there be some coordination of requests for thematic reports, particularly at times when most Parties are preparing their national reports, given that a greater reporting burden will most likely delay the preparation and submission of national reports.

41. *Lesson seven.* There is a need for the Conference of the Parties and for individual Parties to make better use of reports. If reports were widely used, there would be enhanced political will to prepare them. At present there is a vicious circle of incomplete reporting and poor use made of the reports. This situation arises because the reports are rarely provided on time, and do not contain required information. As a result, the Conference of the Parties cannot and does not rely on reports to carry out its function of keeping under review the implementation of the Convention, providing little incentive for Parties to invest time and resources in report preparation. With the adoption of the Strategic Plan, and the framework for evaluating progress towards the 2010 target, however, there is now an opportunity to develop an effective feedback loop.

III. REVIEW OF NATIONAL REPORTING UNDER OTHER CONVENTIONS

42. As is the case for the Convention on Biological Diversity, other international conventions similarly depend on national reports as the primary means of assessing progress in implementation. The conventions reviewed here (and listed in table 1) have taken a number of steps to encourage timely and high-quality report submissions from Parties. This section considers those steps that may be of most relevance to the Convention on Biological Diversity, examining in turn approaches taken to: (i) simplify national report writing and submission; (ii) increase reports' relevance to Parties; (iii) directly motivate timely submission and (iv) review information provided. A summary of the key features of each convention's reporting process is provided in table 2.

43. In comparing the experiences of different conventions, it is important to note that—because of the differing mandates of each convention—the form and content of national reports varies widely among them, as does the ease of reporting. Typically, Parties are asked to report on the activities they have undertaken to meet their obligations under the convention, and to provide information on the current status and trends relevant to the convention. Most similar to the national reporting needs of the Convention on Biological Diversity are those of Ramsar and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). National reports prepared for these conventions must address multiple species, ecosystems and/or issues, and many of the reporting Parties are developing nations with limited human and financial resources. Information requirements for the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the World Heritage Convention (WHC), in contrast, are more specific (table 1). In the case of the UNFCCC (considering requirements under the Convention only, and not under the Kyoto Protocol), the required contents of national communications and the timetable for their submission is different for annex I (i.e., developed countries and countries with economies in transition) and non-annex-I Parties.

Table 1. Overview of national reporting processes of selected international conventions

Convention	Report name ¹	Key information requirements	Reporting cycle	No. of Parties	Submission rate
UNFCCC – UN Framework Convention on Climate Change ²	National communication	<p><u>For annex I Parties:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National circumstances relevant to GHG emissions - GHG inventory information (summary information) - Policies and measures - Projections of GHG emissions/removals - Expected impacts of climate change, vulnerability assessment and adaptation measures - Financial resources and transfer of technology - Research and systematic observation - education, training and awareness activities <p><u>For non-annex I Parties</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National circumstances - GHG inventory (different requirements than for annex I Parties) - Steps taken or envisaged to implement the Convention; - Measures to facilitate adequate adaptation to climate change, and measure to mitigate climate change; - constraints and gaps, and related financial technical and capacity needs 	Every 4 – 5 years	Annex I: 41 Non-annex I: 148 (mainly developing countries)	Annex I: 38/41 (as of 28 months after Nov 2001 deadline) Non-Annex I: 123/148
	Greenhouse gas inventory	Quantitative data in a common reporting format (GHG emissions and removals by gas and by sector (e.g., energy, industry, agriculture) and related data) and a National inventory report	Annual (15 April each year)	Annex I Parties only – 41 countries	39/41 (as of 26 May after the 15 April deadline)

Convention	Report name ¹	Key information requirements	Reporting cycle	No. of Parties	Submission rate
UNCCD – UN Convention to Combat Desertification	National report	<p><u>Affected-country Parties</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country profile (geography, demographics, etc.) as relates to desertification - Progress of implementation (e.g., policy strategies, institutional measures, use of participatory process, direct measures taken to combat desertification) <p><u>Developed country Parties (nb. may also be Affected)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - measures taken to assist in preparation and implementation of action programmes - financial resources provided under the Convention 	Biennial (but affected-country Parties may not need to submit at each reporting period, depending on region under review at CRIC).	115 signatories, 191 ratified	140/186 in 2002
Ramsar Convention on Wetlands	National Planning Tool – National Report	- priorities and progress in implementation, using precise status indicators and explanatory text fields.	Every 3 years	144	107/110 at COP-7
	Information Sheet for Ramsar Wetlands	- basic information and description of site (location, biophysical characteristics, social/cultural values, conservation measures, etc.)	On designation of site, and update every 6 years		
CMS – Convention on Migratory Species	National report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - for convention Appendix I species occurring in the Range State: summary of available data on population size, trends, distribution for selected species, and description of current/future favourable activities (e.g., research), and impediments to these - Appendix II species: references to available distribution data - status of participation in CMS agreements - national priorities, resources, summary of implementation measures taken 	Every 3 years	92	~50% through to COP-6 ³

Convention	Report name ¹	Key information requirements	Reporting cycle	No. of Parties	Submission rate
	Periodic reports	For Appendix II species covered under various CMS agreements			
CITES – Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species	Annual report	Quantitative data – summary of data on permits and trade in listed species	Annual	167	Between 35 – 60% since entry into force (1975)
	Biennial report (still under discussion)	Legislative, regulatory and administrative measures taken to enforce CITES rules	None		-
UNESCO – World Heritage Convention	Periodic Report (submitted by Regions)	- status of application of the convention - state of conservation of heritage sites	On a six year cycle, by region	180 (5 regions)	(first due in 2000)

¹ The list of reports presented may not be exhaustive for each convention listed;

² Information presented for the UNFCCC refers to reporting processes for the Convention only, without considering the Kyoto Protocol;

³ UNEP/CMS/Conf. 7.6.2

Table 2. Summary of key national reporting features of selected international conventions

	CBD	UNCCD	UNFCCC ¹		Ramsar	CMS	CITES ²	UNESCO
			NC	GHG				
Format								
Includes structured format or questionnaire	√		√	√	√	√		√
Request supporting documents				√		√		
Require updates or recent information only		√		√ ³		√		
Two-part reporting process			√		√		√	
Helpful website	√	√			√		√	√
Assistance offered (non-financial)		√	√	√	√		√	√
Electronic template	√			√	√	√		√
Pre-filled form						√		
Software tools				√			(√) ⁴	
Relevance								
In line with Strategic Plan	√	√			√			
Uses targets/ baseline/ indicators		√	√ ⁵		√			
Database available	√			√	√	(√) ⁶	√	
Collaborative process for report preparation requested		√						√ ⁷
Completed reports posted on website	√	√	√	√	√	√	(√) ⁸	
Parties must request deadline extensions							√	
Non/incomplete submissions are made known		√	√	√	√		√	
Punished for non-submission							√	
Review								
Text compilation and synthesis	√	√	√		√	?		√
Formal review process		√	√	√				

¹ refers to UNFCCC National Communications (NC) and greenhouse gas inventories (GHG) required under the Convention (not the Kyoto Protocol). Because of the differentiated reporting requirements and procedures under the UNFCCC, the features listed in this table may not apply to the same degree to all Parties; ² refers to CITES annual reports; ³ Only the latest inventory year has to be reported if certain conditions apply; ⁴ under consideration; ⁵ Under the UNFCCC, Annex I Parties are required to adopt climate change policies with the aim of reducing their GHG emissions to the 1990 levels; ⁶ in preparation; ⁷ Extensive collaboration requested, as part of regional preparation of periodic reports; ⁸ list of Parties that have submitted annual reports is posted; data included in reports are added to database.

A. Simplifying the national reporting process

44. Simplification of report format, information requirements and submission procedures is expected to ease the burden of reporting on Parties. Simpler reports should also promote more consistent responses among Parties, and from year to year by the same Party. All of the conventions reviewed here provide Parties with standard reporting guidelines. There has been a move in recent years towards designing highly-structured guidelines, combining tick-boxes with open-ended questions requiring detailed, text answers. Ramsar's national report format, in particular, is highly structured, and the most similar to the format of the third national report under the Convention on Biological Diversity. Both the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention ask Parties to code responses to certain questions, with the difference that Ramsar Parties are referred to a standard scale to use when assigning codes.

45. Regardless of the structure provided, in most cases (e.g., Ramsar, UNCCD), Parties are free to choose which questions to answer from among those presented. In the case of CMS, Parties do have a binding obligation to provide explicit information on measures taken to protect Appendix I species, but remaining questions are indicative only. Non-binding reporting reduces the burden on Parties, but may lead to difficulties in gathering consistent information for synthesis and analysis.

46. Most reporting processes now provide Parties with an electronic template to simplify report completion, submission and eventual compilation and synthesis by the secretariat. CMS goes a step further, with the secretariat preparing templates that are individualized for each Party, where tables and lists are prepared in advance for specific convention species on which Parties are expected to report. This approach was developed to overcome the problem of Parties not reporting on convention species for which they were in fact a Range State.

47. To reduce the amount of information provided in national reports, reporting guidelines may ask Parties to append relevant documents without repeating the information contained therein (e.g., CMS), to only provide updates on changes since the last report or the latest relevant information/data (e.g., CMS, UNCCD, UNFCCC), or to report separately on various aspects of the convention (e.g., UNFCCC, CITES). This last approach can involve splitting annual quantitative reporting (trade permits in the case of CITES, greenhouse gas emissions for the UNFCCC) from periodic qualitative reports on implementation of the convention.

48. Convention secretariats may offer varying degrees of assistance for report preparation. At the minimum, most conventions maintain a website posting the electronic template, explanatory guidelines and sample reports from previous years. The UNFCCC has a particularly useful webpage ^{4/} that brings together a range of information Parties might need to complete their reports. The site not only lists internal links to relevant convention guidelines, decisions of the Conference of the Parties, conclusions of the subsidiary bodies and reports of workshops, but also external links to statistical databases for use in completing a background section for the national report on the Party's "national circumstances".

49. In addition, secretariats may assign staff or consulting experts to directly assist with the national reporting process. Ramsar, for example, invites administrative authorities to contact their Regional Advisors within the Secretariat for any questions on national reporting. UNESCO-WHC will provide expert advice to Parties on the preparation of reports upon request, or will commission experts themselves after obtaining the concerned Party's agreement. CITES provides a free report-preparation service to Parties, inviting them to submit copies of trade permits to the Secretariat for compilation by UNEP-WCMC. Few CITES Parties take advantage of this service, however, even when specifically invited to do so. ^{5/}

^{4/} http://unfccc.int/national_reports/annex_i_national_communications/fourth_national_communications/items/3360.php

^{5/} CITES: Interpretation and implementation of the Convention, Regular and special reports: Report on national reports required under Article VIII, paragraph 7, of the Convention. (CoP12 Doc. 22.1) – paragraph 20.

50. The UNCCD reporting process—undertaken as part of the preparations for the third session of the Committee to Review Implementation of the Convention (CRIC)—used a participatory approach to assist African countries in addressing national land degradation issues, including the preparation of the third national report. The exercise was a medium-sized Global Environment Facility project implemented by the International Fund for Agricultural Development with the assistance of the UNCCD secretariat. ^{6/} The first component of the project supported the preparation of the national reports, and the second served to validate priorities identified in the national reports, including through workshops. Eligible countries (45) were asked to provide a request on their capacity building needs as a precondition for national reports financing, and to present national report findings and exchange experiences in a series of sub-regional workshops and national multi-stakeholder consultations. The submission rate of national reports by African Parties to CRIC-3 was high, although problems remained with reports' content (e.g., very descriptive and insufficiently analytical, and focused on activities rather than progress made in implementation).

51. Although perhaps not of immediate application to the reporting process of the Convention on Biological Diversity, at least two conventions are using or developing tailored software packages to help Parties with national reports. Following its mandate from Parties, the UNFCCC secretariat provides a software tool to facilitate Parties' reporting of greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory information in a Common Reporting Format (CRF), and is developing new software (CRF Reporter) to facilitate reporting by Parties and subsequent processing of data by the secretariat. CITES is also exploring options for a simple software system that would manage permits and generate reports at the national level. The development of better information management systems is also a long-term objective of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) Task Force (see para. 72 below). Developing similar systems for all the themes addressed by the Convention on Biological Diversity would be challenging, given the breadth of information required of Parties, and its limited and scattered availability, but is a long-term goal worth considering.

B. Increasing the relevance of national reports

52. The burden imposed by national reports on Parties may be in part a matter of perception. In reviewing its national reporting process, the CITES Secretariat noted that failure by Parties to submit annual reports “does not necessarily seem to be a function of a country's extent of development but rather a question of political will and administrative organization”. ^{7/} Accordingly, increasing the relevance of national reports to Parties could serve to raise reports' political profile, draw more support for the reporting process, and thereby increase the timeliness and quality of submissions.

53. Parties that perceive national reporting as unnecessary may be convinced otherwise if report preparation can be made an integral part of the implementation process. This has been the central focus of Ramsar's re-design of their reporting format, shifting “from the previous ‘one-off’ description of actions ... to a dynamic and ongoing framework for strategic planning and action by national governments, which also meets the obligation to provide a national report”. ^{8/} First used in 2003, the National Planning Tool – National Report guides Parties through a review of each operational objective of the convention, helping them to identify the areas of highest priority for action, level of available resources, and the national targets and actions of each. Indicators are essential to the Ramsar format in order to assess the status and progress of implementation, with one or more codified indicators defined for each action under each objective. Like the national report of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar format is aligned with the Strategic Plan, making its relevance to Parties all the more clear. The UNCCD also views report preparation as an integral part of the implementation of the convention, and proposes indicators to measure the status of implementation, but these are not defined as clearly as those used by Ramsar.

^{6/} ‘Supporting Capacity Building for the Elaboration of National Reports and Country Profiles by African Parties to the UNCCD’.

^{7/} CoP12 Doc. 22.1 (paragraph 6)

^{8/} Ramsar. 1999. Format for national reports to be submitted prior to COP-8. (Doc. SC24-12).

54. The perceived usefulness of national reports can be further increased among Parties by promoting a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to report preparation. UNCCD explicitly requests that national report preparation be participatory and integrated, as a way to contribute to “the strengthening of institutional and human capacities of national focal points, thereby improving their ability to coordinate the work, and [stimulating] the further steps required for effective implementation of the UNCCD as an integral part of national efforts to promote sustainable development”. ^{9/} The UNCCD secretariat suggests in its explanatory guidelines a consultative timeframe and workplan to be followed by Parties, ^{10/} with GEF support secured to assist in the participatory preparation of African countries’ third national reports (see para. 50 above).

55. There are other possible advantages to a consultative report preparation process apart from improving coordination on implementation. Participatory reporting by multiple agencies and stakeholders could serve to increase the amount of information gathered on the national level. CITES has recognized this role, calling for better inter-agency coordination as a means to ensure that there are no gaps in trade data submitted by Parties. Involving more agencies in report preparation could also raise the political and administrative profile of national reports. Any advantages to a participatory process, however, would need to be assessed against the practical challenges of coordinating reporting efforts among multiple agencies.

56. Besides working to improve the immediate usefulness of national reporting to Parties’ implementation process, convention secretariats can also seek to increase reports’ relevance by making the information contained therein more widely available. As noted by participants to the expert consultation on streamlining forest-related reporting (12-13 April 2005), there is a concern that reports submitted by countries to many convention bodies are undervalued and underused.

57. A simple but effective means to publicize the information contributed by Parties is to post national reports on the web. As well, some conventions maintain or are developing searchable databases from information submitted by Parties, although their present usefulness is debatable. Ramsar’s relational database is the most similar to the National Reports Analyser of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and is similarly restricted in its level of analysis. Statistics generated are simple percentages reflecting the proportion of Parties that have reported completing or engaging in various actions (e.g., the percentage of Parties answering ‘yes’ to action on the establishment of a national wetland database). Individual Parties are not identified, but broad regional patterns on the status of implementation can be determined through these statistics. The Collaborative Partnership on Forests has developed a prototype website where users can search information items extracted from country reports, organized thematically (see para. 72 below). It should be noted, however, that even where databases are well-developed, Parties appear to make limited use of the available information: the CITES trade database (managed by UNEP-WCMC) has over six million trade records, but is consulted by only a small number of Parties. ^{11/}

58. Information provided by Parties in national reports is generally synthesized by Convention secretariats for presentation to their governing bodies. Providing more reader-friendly syntheses for wider distribution (e.g., preparing executive summaries) could make these reports more useful to Parties and their constituents.

59. If national reports were seen as a platform from which Parties could widely publicize their progress and/or concerns with convention implementation, this could raise the profile of national reports and motivate better contributions. The example of the UNFCCC, where a number of Parties publish reader-friendly national communications and executive summaries, and organize press launches, could be informative in this regard. As well, where Parties are generally interested in the performance of other Parties (as is the case with the UNFCCC), reports will necessarily have a higher profile.

^{9/} UNCCD. 2003. National reporting process of affected country Parties: Explanatory note and help guide (ICCD/CRIC(3)/INF.3).

^{10/} *ibid.*

^{11/} CoP12 Doc. 22-1 (paragraph 20).

C. Direct measures to encourage timely submissions

60. Over and above reducing the real and perceived burden of reporting on national Parties, there are direct actions that can be taken through the conventions' processes to encourage the timely submission of reports.

61. The fact that most conventions now post national reports received from Parties on the Web also allows for the implicit identification of Parties that have not fulfilled their reporting obligations. Parties are either absent from the list, or listed without corresponding links to electronic versions of their national report. Following its mandate from Parties, the UNFCCC secretariat prepares reports providing information on the status of reporting by Parties, covering aspects such as timing and completeness of submissions (e.g., whether the format was adhered to, if all required elements are present). These reports are made available to Parties through official documents, as well as through reports that are posted on the secretariat's website.

62. Under the CITES reporting process, Parties are required to request an extension in advance of the deadline for annual reports. This measure may serve as a means to flag potential problems, and provide an opportunity to the secretariat to offer assistance to the Party. Repeated failure to submit annual reports without adequate justification is taken very seriously by CITES, and can lead to a recommendation (or the threat of a recommendation) by the Conference of the Parties to Parties to suspend trade in CITES-listed species with the delinquent Party. The applicability of this punitive approach to the Convention on Biological Diversity is limited, however, as Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity are not involved in bilateral exchanges with one another under the Convention.

D. Reviewing national reports to improve quality

63. Related to the issue of increasing the relevance of national reports is the need to ensure that information provided by Parties through the reporting process is of high quality. Parties and outside observers will likely take their reporting obligations more seriously if there is a clear standard to meet.

64. Formal review of national reports is one means to directly verify the information provided by Parties, but—with the exception of the UNFCCC and (to a lesser extent) the UNCCD—none of the conventions reviewed here have such procedures in place. At Ramsar, for example, the Regional Advisors within the secretariat read and finalize reports received, but have no formal mandate to corroborate or verify the data supplied. CMS has built in a form of information checking by asking Parties to cite published references to any available scientific papers or reports on species' distribution; however, in the absence of independent review, it would be difficult to know whether references provided by Parties were relevant or comprehensive.

65. National reports submitted by affected country Parties to the UNCCD are subject to peer review during regional meetings preceding sessions of the CRIC. Each Party presents its report, and findings are then subject to discussion on a sub-regional basis. Multilateral and bilateral development partners are also invited to the meeting to provide input. However, the lack of complete participation at these workshops limits the breadth of the peer review process.

66. At the UNFCCC, national communications and annual greenhouse-gas inventories from annex I Parties are both subject to individual in-depth review. Parties are required to archive all data and information used in the preparation of their reports in order to facilitate the review process. The review is conducted by an international team of experts (consisting of experts from both annex-I and non-annex I Parties, and coordinated by the UNFCCC secretariat), and, in the case of inventories, typically involve a desk-based review at one central location (i.e., at the UNFCCC secretariat) and in-country visits to Parties according to a certain frequency. In-country visits are also used for the review of annex I Parties' national communications. All reviews result in a report, and in the case of the national communication reviews, these typically expand on and update the national communication. The review (particularly of the annual inventories) serves not only to better assess Parties' performance in meeting convention requirements, but also provides essential feedback to the Parties to help them improve the quality of their

inventories. The review process of Annex I Parties is integral to the success of the UNFCCC's national reporting process, and as such may deserve closer consideration by the Convention on Biological Diversity.

E. Conclusion

67. Successful national reporting will depend on having the cooperation of Parties. Most conventions lack a process to ensure Parties' compliance in submitting quality reports, and even where punitive measures are possible (e.g., with CITES), problems with reporting remain. At the UNFCCC, where the number of Parties that do submit timely and complete reports has significantly increased in recent years, the cooperative element seems to have been central to this improvement. Reporting guidelines were developed and, in the case of inventories, revised, taking into account experience from Parties through a process of workshops and expert meetings, leading to a constructive and peer-reviewed process.

IV. HARMONIZATION OF NATIONAL REPORTING TO BIODIVERSITY-RELATED TREATIES

68. The Conference of the Parties has consistently supported efforts to harmonize national reporting among the biodiversity-related conventions (decisions V/19, VI/25 and VII/25), as have the conferences of the parties of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, CITES and CMS. A workshop, convened by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), in cooperation with the Governments of Belgium and the United Kingdom and with additional funding from the Government of Germany, was held in Haasrode, Belgium, on 22-23 September 2004 to review four national pilot projects that tested different approaches to harmonization of national information management and reporting to biodiversity-related conventions, and to develop plans and priorities for future work on harmonization. The pilots were carried out in Ghana, Indonesia, Panama and the Seychelles through a UNEP-supported project.

69. The workshop resulted in a number of recommendations which may be relevant to the work of the Working Group in its review of national reporting processes under the Convention. These are reproduced below. The full report is available as an information document and also at <http://www.unep-wcmc.org/conventions/harmonization/workshop.htm>.

(a) ***Purpose of reporting.*** In the interests of increasing the efficiency of reporting, conventions and agreements should clarify and refine the information they need in order to assess implementation and outcomes. They should also address the balance between reporting on implementation and reporting on outcomes, particularly in the light of the 2010 target. When requesting reports, conventions and agreements should also explain clearly what the information will be used for and how it will be analysed;

(b) ***Focus of reporting.*** Reporting should relate to the decisions taken by the governing bodies, both providing information to support the decision-making process, and reporting on actions taken to implement decisions and their effect. With this in mind, after each meeting of governing bodies, countries should disseminate the relevant parts of decisions and an analysis of their impacts to all Ministries which are affected by those decisions;

(c) ***Coordination at international levels.*** The Biodiversity Liaison Group should consider establishing a technical task force to develop and promote a streamlined reporting agenda across conventions and agreements, taking account of the issues raised in the pilot projects and in this report, developments requested by governing bodies and the Environment Management Group;

(d) ***Coordination at the national level.*** At the national level, focal points for each of the biodiversity-related conventions and agreements should establish a mechanism appropriate to national circumstances to ensure coordination of all activities to do with implementation of international obligations at the national level, including reporting;

(e) ***Improving national information management.*** Countries should develop their capacity for managing information more effectively to support implementation of obligations, and for reporting.

Such approaches should focus on enabling access to information and should build on the experience of the pilot projects, and use both existing tools (e.g. guidelines on biodiversity data management previously developed) or tools and networks that are being developed (e.g. the Global Biodiversity Information Facility or the Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network). Access to information necessary for implementation of, and reporting to, all biodiversity-related agreements through a single portal or clearing-house would significantly facilitate a more harmonized approach;

(f) **Information management guidelines.** UNEP-WCMC should revisit the previously developed biodiversity data management guidelines, in order to support countries in achieving the previous recommendation. The guidelines should be revised in the light of experience from the pilot projects and other new developments in reporting and harmonization of reporting (including new developments in information and communications technology), reviewed and disseminated widely;

(g) **Action by individual conventions.** Conventions and agreements should also explore opportunities for taking concrete actions to reduce the reporting burden that they themselves control, for example by not adding new requests for information without removing existing requests in parallel, by reducing the amount of information requested, by linking reporting more closely to strategic planning, by exploring new mechanisms for reporting, and so on;

(h) **Thematic issues.** Active consideration should be given to focusing on specific themes that are relevant across several conventions and agreements, and identifying means to harmonize approaches to information management and reporting, learning lessons from the CPF Task Force (see para. 72 below). Consideration might also be given to thematic reports on specific issues that would be relevant to all conventions and agreements which consider the issue. This may also be a matter for consideration by the Biodiversity Liaison Group;

(i) **Web portal on reporting.** The convention secretariats and UNEP-WCMC should work together to develop and maintain a single, multilingual website (and perhaps also a CD-ROM) that links to existing questionnaires, guidelines and other instructions that secretariats have provided for national reporting, as well as results of the work on streamlining and harmonization. This might also incorporate discussion forums and opportunities for sharing of experience. The joint web site of the biodiversity related conventions (currently hosted by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity) should be investigated as a possible home for this;

(j) **Capacity-building.** Capacity-building activities for information management and reporting among local, national, regional and multilateral applications should focus on all three levels of capacity development: individual, institutional and systemic. It is also recommended that steps should be taken to ensure that the Global Environment Facility and the GEF Implementing Agencies take fully into account the coordination and information management required to support both implementation and reporting for the various multilateral environment agreements when financing and implementing programmes;

(k) **Capacity-building initiatives.** Countries should actively consider the issue of information management to support implementation of and reporting on international obligations, when addressing the development of international initiatives such as the Intergovernmental Working Group on an Intergovernmental Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building, or the GEF National Capacity Self-Assessment Guidelines.

70. The issue of harmonization of reporting among the five biodiversity-related conventions was discussed at the third meeting of the Biodiversity Liaison Group, in May 2005 (see UNEP/CBD/WG-RI/1/INF/7). Noting the challenges of achieving harmonization, including the constant evolution of guidance on reporting within each convention and differing reporting timetables and requirements among conventions, the Liaison Group nonetheless recognized some promising possibilities for increased harmonisation:

(a) A web-portal could be developed to facilitate access to reports and guidelines of each of the conventions (following the example of the Collaborative Portal on Forests);

(b) Common reporting modules could be used for certain themes (e.g. biodiversity of inland waters as a potential common element of the Ramsar and reports of the Convention on Biological Diversity);

(c) The conventions could facilitate harmony in the gathering and management of common data at the national level.

71. The Liaison Group additionally noted that the rationale for harmonization is not to save costs, but rather to facilitate coherent implementation of all five biodiversity-related conventions at the national level. The Group agreed that they would keep each other informed of proposed developments in national reporting under each of the conventions, with a view to aligning approaches where possible.

72. Cooperation among organizations on reporting has also been promoted through the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) which has established a Task Force to propose ways to reduce the forest-related reporting burden on countries by, for example, reducing and streamlining reporting requests, synchronizing reporting cycles, harmonizing data collection methods and increasing data comparability and compatibility, and facilitating the accessibility and flows of existing information. The Task Force has established a portal on forest-related reporting that provides easy access to reports submitted to CPF members (14 organizations and conventions, including the Convention on Biological Diversity) and the corresponding reporting formats. ^{12/} The task force is currently considering options for the development of a framework to coordinate and improve access to information, including a prototype website where users could search information extracted from country reports. A joint information framework could, *inter alia*, reduce overlap in information requests made of Parties, because reported information could be used for several purposes and across different processes.

V. VIEWS OF PARTIES ON NATIONAL REPORTING

73. In submitting views on the issues to be addressed by the Working Group on Review of Implementation of the Convention, some Parties addressed the issue of national reporting. These Parties noted that the third national reports were difficult to understand, legalistic, repetitive, and resource intensive, and expressed concerns about the utility of national reports in their current format, as well as the rigor of the processes such reports inform. Most Parties agreed that national reports should be outcome-oriented and designed such that results contribute to the assessment of the effectiveness of the Convention over time. Some Parties suggested basing reports on the global indicators included in the 2010 framework and one initiative provided evidence that, even with few resources, the global indicators could successfully be translated into national indicators and used for reporting. Some Parties emphasized the importance of quantitative data in facilitating the measurement of trends over time, and one Party noted the need to allow for reporting on activities that support the objectives of the Convention, but that are not linked to national biodiversity strategies and action plans.

74. Some Parties recommended streamlining thematic, national, regional and global reports to facilitate the monitoring of trends over time and suggested further exploring possibilities for the harmonization of national reporting for biodiversity-related conventions. They also proposed developing the clearing-house mechanism to better facilitate international biodiversity-related reporting. In addition, Parties noted the need to develop incentives and other mechanisms to encourage and assist Parties to submit reports in a timely manner.

^{12/} www.fao.org/forestry/cpf-mar

VI. POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE REPORTING PROCESS UNDER THE CONVENTION

75. The review of the experience and lessons learned from the reporting process under the Convention clearly indicates that there is a strong need to introduce changes if national reports are to provide adequate information to the Conference of the Parties for facilitating decision-making. Access to relevant and reliable information is particularly important now as the Convention moves from a phase of policy development to one of implementation. To this end, some options for improvement are proposed in the following section. The general objectives of these proposed options are:

- (a) To improve the reporting guidelines with a view to allowing Parties to report more on national actions and outcomes, and less on processes;
- (b) To increase the relevance of the reporting process to Parties and the Convention, so that national reports become useful as a planning tool at both the national and international level;
- (c) To give more time for report preparation by advance notice from the Conference of the Parties and earlier availability of the reporting guidelines;
- (d) To reduce reporting burdens placed on Parties and to expedite the preparation and submission of national reports;
- (e) To strengthen capacities of developing country Parties for information and data collection, processing and management;
- (f) To facilitate the timely availability of the necessary financial resources for developing country Parties; and
- (g) To provide for complementary reporting processes, on a voluntary basis, in order to meet the multiple purposes of reporting.

A. *Main national reports*

76. It is proposed that the main national report will, in future, focus on outcomes, with Parties required to report on (i) status and trends of biodiversity; (ii) national actions and outcomes with respect to the achievement of the 2010 target and the goals of the Strategic Plan of the Convention; and (iii) progress in implementation of national biodiversity strategies and action plans. This report could be presented largely in narrative form, together with supporting statistical annexes. The report will be as short as possible and will use simple, unambiguous language. The four-year reporting period ^{13/} will be timed to coincide with the production of the Global Biodiversity Outlook. The report should contain an executive summary of national implementation progress and outcomes, to be compiled and published as a by-product of the Global Biodiversity Outlook.

77. By linking the main national report with the achievement of the 2010 target and the goals of the Strategic Plan, national reports submitted by Parties will help both Parties and the Conference of the Parties identify gaps and further actions for the implementation of the Convention. Drawing on lessons learned in the preparation of the first, second and third national reports, the proposed format would give Parties more flexibility to report on progress in the implementation of national priorities (through narrative answers) but also serve as a means to compile quantitative information (through statistical annexes). The main report will be considerably shorter than the current national report format, as a result of most process-oriented questions being eliminated, ^{14/} and questions relating to the implementation of particular thematic programmes of work being moved to relevant, complementary reports on thematic areas (see below). The main report's proposed narrative structure, focus on clear goals and shorter length

^{13/} This assumes that the current practice of holding meetings of the Conference of the Parties every two years is maintained, and may need to be reviewed if the periodicity of meetings is changed.

^{14/} Although Parties will have the option of using an on-line-reporting facility, as described in paragraphs 85-87 below.

should increase its appeal to a general audience, helping to raise the profile of national reporting among politicians and society at large. This increased relevance should help draw more resources to the reporting process, and increase Parties' compliance with reporting requirements.

78. In preparing their national reports, Parties will be encouraged to report on progress towards the national and regional targets set within the framework of decision VII/30 and the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation (decision V/9), and to use the indicators adopted by the Conference of the Parties for measuring progress in the achievement of the 2010 target and the goals of the Strategic Plan. The use of indicators for reporting purposes will help with the review and the assessment of the implementation of the Convention at national level, and help guide policy at the international level.

79. It is proposed that executive summaries of national implementation progress and outcomes be compiled and published as a by-product of the Global Biodiversity Outlook, in order to disseminate more widely the information concerning national implementation of the Convention, and to demonstrate to Parties the usefulness of information submitted through national reports.

80. While the reporting interval will remain four years, it is proposed that the Conference of the Parties at its eighth meeting sets the date for submission of the fourth national report, and that the guidelines for those reports be considered by the Conference of the Parties at that time, and finalized shortly thereafter so that they can be made available to Parties by mid-2006. Parties would then have about three years to prepare their reports – three times longer than previously. In addition, Parties that anticipate difficulty in meeting the deadline might be invited to inform the Secretariat, as is the practice in CITES, so that ways and means of overcoming the difficulties could be explored.

81. To facilitate the timely submission of national reports and strengthen the capacity of developing countries in the collection, processing and management of data and information, it is proposed that technical assistance would be provided to those countries that indicate such need. It is also proposed that a series of workshops could be organized for this purpose. In the meantime, the Secretariat will employ various means to facilitate the preparation of national reports, such as development of manuals for information and data collection, processing and management.

82. To expedite and simplify procedures for fund application and allocation for preparing national reports, it is proposed that the Global Environment Facility adopt a package approach whereby its implementing agencies apply for funds on behalf of eligible countries and allocate funds on the basis of requests from and proposals submitted by eligible countries. Compared with individual applications, this approach will save much time and make procedures easier for fund application and allocation.

83. Considering that there is no formal mechanism of compliance under the Convention, it is proposed that the Conference of the Parties identify ways and means to promote compliance by Parties with their reporting obligations under the Convention. One possibility could be that the Conference of the Parties direct a decision to those countries that have not submitted their national reports and urge them to submit reports soon.

84. To increase the quality of information provided by national reports, and consequently increase their relevance, a review process could be established. The review could consist of an analysis by the Secretariat, or of an external peer-review (on the model of that instituted by the UNFCCC). Regional preparatory meetings for the meetings of the Conference of the Parties might also review the national reports, in a process similar to that used under the UNCCD.

B. Complementary reporting processes

85. While the main national report would be simplified by removing most process-oriented questions from the guidelines, Parties may still find answering such questions a useful exercise. Accordingly, an on-line reporting facility could be developed that would assist Parties in their ongoing planning of implementation activities, and serve as a means to assess progress against the specific decisions of the Conference of the Parties. The on-line facility would build upon the format of the second and third

national reports. Questions would be as clear and concise as possible and the use of subjective language would be avoided. Use of the reporting facility would be voluntary, and could serve to increase coordination among implementing agencies at the national level by allowing multiple collaborators to work remotely on the report.

86. The new reporting process would invite Parties to submit complementary reports on selected individual thematic areas (as is now the case with thematic reports) as part of the revised national reporting process. Complementary reports would be submitted according to the schedule established by the multi-year programme of work of the Convention for in-depth review of each thematic area. These focused reports would provide up-to-date information allowing for review by SBSTTA as it prepares for the in-depth review by the Conference of the Parties of the programmes of work adopted under the Convention. These complementary reports would replace existing thematic reports, and lead to the removal of related questions from the relevant sub-section currently included in the national report format.

87. Rather than reporting on each thematic area every four years, Parties would in future have up to ten years between submission of consecutive reports on any one thematic area (the interval in practice depending on that agreed in future multi-year programmes of work of the Convention), allowing more time for progress in implementation to occur and for report preparation. In addition, coordination and preparation of complementary reports will be facilitated by their narrow focus, allowing for easier coordination among relevant government ministries and other sources of information. This would also allow for easier harmonization of components of reports with other relevant conventions.

C. Harmonization of reporting

88. In addition to harmonizing reporting on specific themes, the five biodiversity-related conventions, through the Biodiversity Liaison Group, will keep each other informed of proposed developments in national reporting and seek to align approaches where possible. A Webportal with links to reports and guidelines for each convention would help with this process. It would also help to promote the harmonization of data collection and management at the national level by facilitating planning. Parties could also be encouraged to streamline such national level processes.

Annex

SCHEDULE OF COMPLEMENTARY REPORTS ON THEMATIC PROGRAMMES

(Dates are indicative -- to be discussed)

Thematic area¹	In-depth review		Date due for review
	By COP	By SBSTTA	
Forest biodiversity	COP-9	SBSTTA-12	September 2006
Agricultural biodiversity	COP-9	SBSTTA-13	March 2007
Inland waters biodiversity	COP-10	SBSTTA-14	July 2008
Mountain biodiversity	COP-10	SBSTTA-14	July 2008
Marine and coastal biodiversity	COP-10	SBSTTA-15	March 2009
Island biodiversity	t.b.d.	t.b.d.	t.b.d.

¹ The dry and sub-humid lands programme of work will be reviewed at the eighth meeting of the Conference of the Parties.
