



Background paper
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HARMONIZATION OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING FOR BIODIVERSITY-RELATED TREATIES

Note by the Executive Director

Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Definitions	2
III. Needs and benefits	2
IV. Mandate	4
V. Overcoming barriers to harmonization	6
VI. Strategic approach	7
VII. Pragmatic approach	8
VIII. Progress to date	8
IX. Recommended actions	12
X. Other potential supporting and demonstration actions	14
XI. Mechanisms for improving institutional interlinkages at the international level	15
X. National coordination mechanisms	16
ANNEXES	19

I. Introduction

1. At its first meeting on 22 January 2001, the Environmental Management Group (EMG) discussed the issue of harmonization of national reporting and agreed to establish an Issue Management Group (IMG) dealing with this issue (Decision 3). UNEP was invited to serve as task manager, focusing on biodiversity-related conventions while considering the relevance of biodiversity-related aspects of other Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). The IMG was asked to look at this issue comprehensively, taking into account issues such as the best use of lessons learned, the composition of the group and the number of the countries to be used in a pilot phase. UNEP was asked to provide EMG with its recommendations at its next session.
2. An early draft of this paper, prepared by UNEP, provided the basis for an IMG teleconference on 7 June, which included the participation of the secretariats of four global biodiversity-related treaties (CITES, Convention on Migratory Species, Convention on Wetlands and the Convention

on Biological Diversity). Input was subsequently also provided by the secretariat of the World Heritage Convention and the Secretariat of the Cartagena Convention, as well as additional input from the participants in the teleconference. The paper was then discussed by the EMG at its meeting on 15 June 2001, and further substantive input was received from FAO, UNESCO and the secretariats of the Barcelona Convention, the Basel Convention and the Convention to Combat Desertification. Some of the content also benefits from discussion with staff at the European Environment Agency, the United Nations University and two UK agencies, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Scottish Natural Heritage.

3. This paper will provide an input to a report to the UN Secretary General as part of the preparation of documentation and other preparatory activities called for in UN General Assembly resolution 55/198 on enhancing complementarities among international instruments related to environment and sustainable development. This is in preparation for the review of implementation of Agenda 21 to be carried out in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). Effective co-ordination and management of MEAs is one of the critical issues that need to be addressed under international environmental governance, which will be discussed in depth at the WSSD. This meeting is seen as a critical opportunity to advance further international co-operation for sustainable development on the basis of concrete commitments at the highest level.
4. In preparation for the summit, the UNEP Governing Council has established an open-ended intergovernmental group to undertake a comprehensive policy-oriented assessment of existing institutional weaknesses, as well as future needs and options for strengthened international environmental governance. The report of this group, which will include input from MEA secretariats, will be reviewed by the next session of the Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum, which will provide guidance to the tenth session of the CSD (the preparatory body for the WSSD) on future requirements of international environmental governance in the broader context of multilateral efforts for sustainable development.

II. Definitions

5. For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions apply. The two terms are clearly not mutually exclusive:
 - (i) Streamlining: The streamlining of national reporting is defined as those mechanisms that make each individual reporting process or an integrated process easier or more straightforward for contracting parties to implement.
 - (ii) Harmonisation: The harmonisation of information management and reporting is defined as those activities that lead to a more integrated process and greater potential for sharing information.

III. Needs and benefits

6. As MEAs have multiplied, the number of reports and other information required from parties to those agreements has also increased significantly. Many countries, both developed and developing, have regularly expressed concern about the burden this imposes.
7. Reporting to MEAs serves a variety of purposes:

- (i) Reports allow the governing bodies of agreements to assess implementation so as to be in a position to make rational decisions on future priorities and needs, and to provide, or guide the provision of, additional support where it is required.
 - (ii) Reports may contain very specific information. For example the CITES annual report is very specific in providing the information necessary to determine the nature and volume of legal trade (also providing indication of potential illegal trade).
 - (iii) Contracting parties are also frequently asked to provide other information beyond regular reports, such as expanded detail on specific issues, case studies and experiences, in order to support development of advice to contracting parties, and to promote the sharing of information between parties.
8. Apart from the concern of reporting burden, there are strong concerns that the full value of the information gathered is not being realised due to limited access and lack of comparability. Multi-purpose use of information provided in national reports (e.g. for national, regional or global assessment and planning) would be of significant benefit to national governments as well as facilitating interagency approaches and actions.
9. Benefits of harmonization of reporting could accrue to all stakeholders, including national governments, MEA secretariats and governance bodies, and the world community. Some of these potential benefits include *inter alia*:
- (i) *To national governments*
 - encourage identification of a consolidated list of obligations cross-sectorally
 - identify national priorities on implementation of MEAs in a holistic manner
 - encourage participation of all levels of government in implementation and reporting
 - improve awareness of national obligations and compliance of MEAs
 - improve ability to assess achievement of treaty objectives and set future priorities
 - identify gaps in national legislation and policies
 - assist in annual budget preparation
 - identify ways to avoid duplication of efforts between institutions
 - facilitate preparation of national strategic plans to implement MEAs
 - reduced burden of meeting reporting requirements of treaties
 - improved information available through secretariats
 - increased ability to develop and use clearing-house mechanisms and integrated indicators of sustainability
 - improved efficiency and effectiveness of national biodiversity information systems
 - improved ability to implement country-driven action responding to MEA commitments
 - (ii) *To MEA secretariats*
 - encourage and support governments in the implementation of their own national priorities
 - timely receipt of national reports, enabling the Secretariats to prepare analyses that help the conferences of parties to assess achievement of treaty objectives and identify future priority issues
 - improved efficiency of information management
 - improved efficiency in the use of information technology and communications

- improved integrated analysis capacity and improved ability to coordinate interagency programmes of work, through sharing of information and experience
- improved linkages with international environmental monitoring agencies, major data custodians, and regional treaties
- improved basis for decision making by COPs, subsidiary bodies and secretariats

(iii) *To the world community*

- improved awareness of emerging issues and inter-relationships
- global and regional overviews
- reliable and comparable information for research

IV. Mandate

10. UN General Assembly: Resolution 55/198 welcomed the work of convention secretariats and contracting parties in enhancing complementarities among international instruments related to environment and sustainable development, and encouraged further efforts to strengthen cooperation and to streamline national reporting. This built on earlier resolutions of the General Assembly, including resolutions 54/217 and 53/186 which also encouraged convention secretariats to address practical issues including more effective exchange of information and supporting efforts at the national level towards adopting an integrated approach to implementation of environmental and environment-related conventions.
11. At its nineteenth special session, the UN General Assembly, by its resolution S/19-2, adopted the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21. The programme included a recommendation that the conferences of parties to the conventions signed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development or as a result of it, as well as other conventions related to sustainable development, should cooperate in exploring ways and means of collaborating in their work to advance the effective implementation of those conventions.
12. Commission on Sustainable Development: Consistent with paragraph 38.13 of Agenda 21, the Secretary-General has made a number of recommendations concerning the streamlining of national reporting (E/CN.17/1997/6), including the establishment of reporting calendars and the use of the Internet, which the Commission has actively implemented in its subsequent reporting cycles following acceptance of the report by the Commission (Decision 5/103).
13. UNEP: The Nairobi Declaration on the Role and Mandate of UNEP (1997) identifies one of the core elements of the UNEP mandate as being to develop “coherent interlinkages among existing international environmental conventions”. This, and other parts of the UNEP mandate concerning coordination of environmental activities in the UN system, give a clear mandate for UNEP to lead efforts to promote synergies among the biodiversity-related treaties. This is further supported by Chapter 38 of Agenda 21 and UNEP Governing Council Decisions 17/25, 18/9, 19/9c and 20/18b.
14. Further to adoption of UN General Assembly decision 52/445, the Secretary General established the UN Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements, chaired by the UNEP Executive Director. The task force recommended that UNEP continue to support joint meetings of heads of convention secretariats in order to ensure complementarity and synergy (consistent with paragraph 38.22(h) of Agenda 21), and that arrangements be made for periodic joint meetings of representatives from conventions to address cross-cutting issues. The task force report was submitted to the UN General Assembly as an annex to A/53/463, and noted in resolution 53/242.

15. Convention on Wetlands: Resolution VII/4 of the Conference of Parties (May 1999) requests the Ramsar Convention Bureau to collaborate in efforts to harmonise information management among the environment-related conventions, and in particular to assist the proposed pilot testing of a streamlined approach to national report preparation. Further to this, the Strategic Plan 1997-2002 includes a number of actions concerning the reporting process and the implementation of processes for regularly reviewing the efficiency and effectiveness of all Ramsar Convention institutions, mechanisms and programmes.
16. Convention on Migratory Species: The Information Management Plan adopted by Resolution 6.5 of the Conference of Parties (November 1999) requests the Secretariat to liaise with information managers of other global biodiversity-related treaties on streamlining information management and reporting, and further stresses the importance of increased harmonization within CMS and its related agreements. Operational objectives within the Strategic Plan for 2000-2005 are also concerned with data required for decision making (2.7) and institutional linkages with partner organisations (4.4).
17. CITES: The strategic plan (Strategic Vision Through 2005) and report adopted by the Conference of Parties (April 2000) gives renewed emphasis to the importance of cooperation and interlinkages with UNEP and other biodiversity-related conventions (Goal 5). Particularly relevant are the two objectives that deal with this issue (5.1 and 5.2). In addition, Goal 1 of the strategic plan is concerned with enhancing the ability of each party to implement the convention, which includes improving the availability of information on which decisions are made (1.4 and 1.5).
18. Convention on Biological Diversity: Decision V/19 of the Conference of Parties (May 2000) requests the Executive Secretary to proceed with the further development and implementation of the proposals for streamlining national reporting, in collaboration with the secretariats of the other biodiversity-related conventions. Further to this, decision V/20 is concerned with the development of a strategic plan for the Convention, which is certain to also cover these issues.
19. World Heritage Convention: UNESCO's intergovernmental World Heritage Committee has recognised the collective interest that would be advanced by closer co-ordination of that convention's work with other international conservation instruments, as specified in the committee's Operational Guidelines paragraph 139. Specific mention is made of co-ordination and information sharing.
20. World Network of Biosphere Reserves: The 16th Session of the MAB International Coordinating Council (November 2000) noted the assistance provided by the Secretariat to countries in promoting interaction between MAB and other programmes, building on existing synergies at the national level between MAB and complementary approaches and activities. The Council decided that it would be valuable to seek ways to inform MAB National Committees about ongoing synergies and complementarity of international efforts, raise awareness, and strengthen such synergies.
21. Regional seas: Decision 28 adopted by the UNEP Governing Council at its 21st session requested the Executive Director to use global meetings of regional seas conventions and action plans and other cost-effective consultative mechanisms in the further strengthening of regional seas programmes and for building synergies and collaboration among environmental agreements. More specifically, the Secretariat of the Cartagena Convention has memoranda of understanding with the CBD Secretariat and the Ramsar Convention Bureau which specifically refer to "exploring the possibility of recommending procedures for harmonising, to the extent desirable and practicable, the reporting requirements of Parties under those instruments and conventions".

22. Convention to Combat Desertification: The report of the *ad hoc* working group to the fifth session of the Conference of Parties (ICCD/COP(4)/AHWG/6) recognises the relationship between biodiversity protection and measures to combat desertification, and notes that “linkages and synergies with other multilateral agreements and/or strategic frameworks on environment and development must be further encouraged through concrete initiatives”. Specifically recommended is greater collaboration between focal points of the different agreements (UNCCD, UNFCCC, CBD) at national level.

V. Overcoming barriers to harmonization

23. Full harmonization of reporting and information management amongst the MEAs and related agencies cannot be achieved instantly. Some of the potential barriers to success include:
- (i) *At the national level*
- fragmented responsibility for national biodiversity information management
 - limited understanding of the link between reporting and efficient implementation of MEAs
 - lack of sufficient communication between implementers on the ground and national focal points or administrative authorities
 - differing focal points and stakeholders involved in the implementation of different MEAs at the national level
 - jurisdictional conflicts in implementation of MEAs on the ground
 - limited funding and human resources for information management
 - different reporting formats, timing and purposes
- (ii) *At the international level*
- limited funding and human resources for information management
 - lack of capacity to participate in so many fora on harmonisation and interlinkages of MEAs
 - danger of duplication and overlapping considering the number of agencies and organisations carrying out activities related to this issue
 - uncertainty or debate that makes standards (such as taxonomies) difficult to achieve
 - differing economic, legislative, social, administrative, and statistical systems of contracting parties
 - different reporting formats, timing and purposes
24. Some of the reasons that make harmonization desirable also contribute to making it difficult to achieve. Progress in harmonization must recognise these barriers and consider ways of surmounting them. It is therefore important at one time to have a strategic view, that is to have a common inter-agency view of an ultimate desirable outcome or target, and at the same time to take progressive, pragmatic, achievable steps that move towards this target.
25. Overcoming the barriers requires:
- clear understanding of the purpose and benefits at all levels
 - interagency cooperation
 - multi-national cooperation
 - information and experience sharing
 - wide consultation with stakeholders

- progressive and incremental steps through pilot projects that solve practical problems
 - adoption of tested procedures for wider implementation
26. It is important to appreciate that harmonization does not imply standardisation, but rather approaches that enable the gathering and integration of information for multi-purpose use. Attention should be paid to lessons learned and the successful pragmatic approaches already taken by major agencies, and adopt these as interim measures while true international standards evolve where these are necessary.
27. A balance must be achieved between prescriptive reporting, and the recognition that national reporting should be an integral part of existing national economic and social accounting processes. Reports should be the output of the information management processes required for effective implementation of agreements at the national level, not the result of a separate exercise.

VI. Strategic approach

28. Scope: The scope of this paper and the actions proposed is the harmonisation of information management and reporting for the global and regional biodiversity-related treaties and agreements, and biodiversity-relevant aspects of other MEAs.
29. Vision: A harmonised and streamlined approach to information management and reporting for the biodiversity-related treaties and programmes that ensures efficient and effective compilation, management and use of information, reducing duplication of effort at national and international levels, and increasing synergy in the use of information.
30. Objectives: The following short and medium-term objectives are recommended for future implementation of this work:

Short term objectives

- (i) To test and review the opportunities and needs for a range of potential mechanisms for increased streamlining and harmonisation
- (ii) To provide supporting tools and demonstration actions which will assist both contracting parties and secretariats in the process of streamlining and harmonising

Medium term objectives

- (iii) To review the results of the tests and identify how to implement them in the context of the needs and governance structures of the different MEAs
 - (iv) To identify further actions to be taken at the national and international levels to increase streamlining and harmonisation, including *inter alia* capacity building at the national level
 - (v) To increase the availability of information resulting from these changes to support all MEA implementation activities including increasing public information and awareness
31. National involvement: In order to ensure that appropriate measures are developed and ultimately adopted, it is essential to involve in the harmonisation process all national institutions responsible for implementation of the different MEAs on the ground. This will ensure that the measures proposed are meaningful at the national level, and also ensure that there are contracting parties who can “champion” particular approaches in the various MEA governance fora.

32. Interagency cooperation: It is essential that international agencies cooperate closely in ensuring increased access to the information necessary for implementation of MEAs, whether this is information obtained through the reporting process or other means. Increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of use of information at all levels should be a major objective of all international agencies, including MEA secretariats.
33. Consultation: In order to ensure interagency cooperation and taking advantage of lessons learned, the strategy should include wide consultation not only amongst the biodiversity MEAs and their contracting parties, but beyond to other related MEAs and international agencies experienced in the field (for example trade-related organisations have experience of direct relevance to CITES). Furthermore, consultation within countries, between the different agencies and institutions responsible for the implementation of MEAs is a key issue.

VII. Pragmatic approach

34. Achievable targets: Harmonisation should progress by emphasising short-term achievable targets. Opportunities to make gains should be taken where there is subject matter that lends itself easily to harmonised approaches, or where some nations have found solutions that can be replicated or adapted to similar conditions.
35. Pilot projects: Pilot projects should involve a few countries, or narrow subject matter areas that can demonstrate proof-of-concept. These should be carefully chosen so as to be likely to succeed in a relatively short time frame, and should not merely be demonstrations or models, but be designed to address specific and current needs, with a view to adaptability to differing situations. In this regard approaches taken should be linked to existing schedules, standards and commonly used formats.
36. Indicators of success: Clearly defined indicators of success should be defined for each pilot project or incremental implementation step, and all pilot projects should have critical assessment and review before expansion, adaptation or replication.

VIII. Progress to date

37. There are many initiatives relevant to harmonization of reporting and information management for the biodiversity-related treaties. The following examples are indicative of the type of work being done by a wide range of international agencies.
38. Commission for Sustainable Development: At their sessions during 1994-1997, the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) discussed the issue of harmonising national reporting. They concluded that the issue was difficult to address for a number of reasons relating to whether the report was voluntary or binding in nature, variations in periodicity and the nature of the information requested. IACSD recommended that the next step that needed to be taken was to streamline the requests for information that were being made to national governments.
39. For some years the Commission has made every effort to encourage countries to submit their reports on the implementation of Agenda 21 in electronic format, and provides guidelines and forms for completion. The information received through the reporting process is compiled in the UN system-wide sustainable development website, where information can be accessed on a country-by country or issue-by-issue basis. In addition to this, an interactive database on national information is being developed to facilitate submission of national reports to future CSD sessions as well as to optimise the use of national reports and therefore the exchange of information.

40. UNDP and the Rio Agreements: In 1997, UNDP convened an expert meeting to explore ways to create synergy between and among the Rio Agreements. This meeting was based on two fundamental principles developed in consultation with participants and stakeholders, including representatives of the Secretariats of and Parties to the instruments:
- that a recognition of potential synergies among the instruments must be an integral part of the planning process and implementation for each; and
 - that strengthening and building in-country capacity is essential to the producing synergy in the implementation of the agreements.
- Working Group 4 covered the issue of information and reporting requirements, and recommended a number of key actions for national and international attention. These recommendations are built into the actions proposed in this paper.
41. Feasibility study: In 1998 the five global biodiversity-related treaty secretariats and UNEP commissioned the then World Conservation Monitoring Centre to undertake a feasibility study to identify opportunities for harmonising information management between the treaties. The study considered approaches towards development of a harmonised information management infrastructure for the treaties within their existing defined mandates. Its purpose was to consider how the secretariats could improve effectiveness and efficiency in gathering, handling, disseminating and sharing information, and the secretariats have made some follow up since that study was completed. The study recommended a range of actions incorporated into this paper.
42. UNEP: The UNEP Division of Environmental Conventions convenes regular meetings of convention secretariats to promote coordination between them, and has also organized several expert meetings on collaboration and inter-linkages. UNEP's priorities for work in this area include: promoting information exchange amongst secretariats; strengthening collaboration amongst the conventions' scientific and technical bodies; revitalizing support to the regional seas conventions and action plans; making international trade and environmental regimes more compatible; and streamlining national reporting. UNEP produces a *Synergies* bulletin twice a year, which aims to promote collaboration on environmental treaties.
43. UNEP Environment and Natural Resources Information Network: This programme helps to build capacity for making the environmental assessments needed for state of the environment reporting. It promotes co-operative networks at the regional level that can serve as conduits for the flow of data and information needed for regional and global assessments, policy making and planning.
44. UNEP workshop: In October 2000, UNEP convened a workshop to explore ideas for a more harmonised approach to national reporting to international agreements and to develop pilot projects for testing these ideas at national and international levels. The workshop was attended by representatives of eight convention secretariats, eight countries and several international organisations involved in exploring the potential synergies between international agreements and programmes. The results of this workshop and the progress since on the development of pilot projects to test approaches to harmonisation of reporting are covered later in this paper.
45. UNEP Biodiversity Planning Support Programme workshop: In May, UNEP and the Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development convened a workshop on "Legislative Complementarity and Harmonisation of Biodiversity-related MEAs". The workshop was attended by representatives of the CBD and other biodiversity-related treaties, and nine countries. The objective of the workshop was to discuss key areas of overlap and synergy between the biodiversity-related conventions, as part of a programme to:

- facilitate a harmonised, integrated and cost-effective approach to implementing the CBD and other biodiversity-related conventions at the national level
 - contribute to improving policy, legal and administrative co-ordination at national level in order to comply effectively with international obligations
 - publish and dissemination of a set of best practice guidelines on co-ordinated implementation of biodiversity-related conventions at national level
46. United Nations University: The UNU and its partners have convened two conferences (one global, one regional) to assist in the development of a synergistic and coordinated approach to environmental policy making that takes account of existing inter-linkages between environmental issues. Objectives were to: create awareness at the public, governmental and intergovernmental levels of the importance of synergies and coordination between MEAs; survey existing initiatives; foster discussion and interaction among international institutions, scholars and other relevant stakeholders who can cooperate to identify and examine opportunities; and identify concrete mechanisms, next steps and feasible win-win paths forward on this important issue. The main outputs were recommendations on the promotion of inter-linkages between MEAs in the areas of harmonization of information systems and information exchange, finance, issue management, scientific mechanisms, and synergies for sustainable development. Those recommendations related to reporting and information management are incorporated into this paper.
47. European Environment Agency: The EEA is working on a range of projects that are looking at reporting obligations and mechanisms at national and community level. These include the following:
- (i) The EEA Reporting Obligations Database currently under development aims to inventory all obligations, both legal and moral, resulting from reporting requirements and expectations as a categorized and key-worded series of questions or information elements requested.
 - (ii) As part of EIONET, the EEA is testing mechanisms for compilation of information from multiple sources over the Internet, particularly for use in “state of environment” type reporting for the European region.
 - (iii) The EEA is also working on a project which aims to streamline reporting mechanisms for the 64 environmental agreements to which the European Community itself is party. A substantive report on this work has recently been completed.
48. Convention secretariats: The secretariats of the global biodiversity-related treaties are aware of the need to increase access to the information that they manage, and to streamline and harmonisation information management and reporting. For example:
- (i) CMS: Over the years CMS and its various agreements have developed approaches to reporting and information management that, although similar, are not integrated. The CMS Secretariat is now leading efforts to synthesise and integrate the information contained in the national reports provided to the secretariats, and is developing a more integrated approach to reporting on migratory species. CMS is also following Ramsar in moving towards reporting more closely linked to the strategic plan. The more thorough synthesis of the national reports is also leading to a helpful review of implementation.
 - (ii) CBD: The CBD Secretariat has taken a lead in ensuring that not only are all the reports submitted to the secretariat available online, there are also search tools that facilitate access to the information that the reports contain. In addition, the second round of national

reports are formatted to provide a checklist of those actions that a Contracting Party is obliged or requested to undertake as a result of Convention Articles or conference decisions, moving away for a text-based report to a questionnaire.

- (iii) Ramsar: For many years the Ramsar Convention Bureau has provided Parties with clear guidance on how to prepare national reports. In 1999, 107 out of a possible 110 Parties submitted national reports (three were exempt), and all of these reports are available online. The guidelines have evolved over the years, and now focus tightly on the strategic plan. The latest version of the reporting tool is now also being developed as a planning tool for implementation of the strategic plan at the national level.
 - (iv) CITES: CITES has provided “Guidelines for the Preparation and Submission of CITES Annual Reports” since 1994 (comprehensively revised in 1999), and is now exploring how the quality of annual reports might be improved, how the data might be better presented and used, and how to ensure timely submission. The Secretariat has begun studying the submission rates and contents of biennial reports, with a view to developing guidelines for these reports too.
 - (v) World Heritage: The World Heritage Convention has only recently begun a periodic reporting process, and is currently reviewing the results of regional reports for Africa and the Arab states, with a view to learning from what has been done so far. Experiments are beginning on reporting using web templates, and some discussion has been entered into on linking this to management of information on individual sites on the Internet.
49. International Plant Protection Convention: The aim of this convention is to secure common and effective action to prevent the spread and introduction of pests of plants and plant products and to promote measures for their control. One of the ways that this is achieved is by setting and publishing standards (including, for example, standards on the reporting of pests and pest outbreaks). Standards are developed and adopted following agreed international processes.
50. World Network of Biosphere Reserves: In recent years a periodic review process has been established whereby the effectiveness of Biosphere Reserves is evaluated on a decadal cycle, and it is intended that the results from this evaluation process will be made available through the MAB website. The process is still evolving, and in some countries this is leading to a more thorough review of the biosphere reserves network.
51. Regional seas conventions:
- (i) Nairobi Convention: The Contracting parties to the Nairobi Convention, meeting in May 2000 to assess progress in implementation of the CBD Jakarta Mandate in the Eastern Africa region, compiled information country-by-country on the action taken. Their report, and the process used in compiling it, was presented as a potential model for all regional seas conventions and action plans to report to CBD on progress made in the implementation of the Jakarta Mandate.
 - (ii) Cartagena Convention: Discussions on reporting will take place at the September 2001 meeting of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee. The value of integrating the SPAW Protocol reporting process with the reporting to other biodiversity-related treaties is well understood, and consideration will be given to the formats and processes used by at least CBD, Ramsar and CMS and how to integrate with these approaches.

52. State of Environment reporting: The EEA, UNEP GRID Arendal and the Danish National Environmental research Institute have collaborated on development of the *State of the Environment Reports Information System* covering the Pan-European region. This is an internet based information service providing an overview of SoE documents (paper reports, internet versions and policy related products) developed by each country. The service also provides an overview of environmental issues and sectors treated in SoE reports, and information can be accessed by either issue or country in a similar manner to the UN system-wide sustainable development website.
53. Forest-related MEAs: During 2000, the Centre for International and European Environmental Research conducted a project on finding synergy between forest-related MEAs at global, regional (European Union) and national levels. Their recommendations, which were wide-ranging, included: ensuring harmonised and complementary reporting of implementation of forest-related obligations to international bodies; undertaking a full review of MEA obligations relating to forests and carrying out a gap analysis to identify the extent to which these obligations are being implemented; and ensuring that all stakeholders have access to all information relevant to implementation of forest-related MEAs.

IX. Recommended actions

54. The following paragraphs provide a range of possible actions to be undertaken. Some are already underway, and others will require a major input of resources before they could be undertaken. Each action is described further in an annex referred to in the text. It should also be noted that there are clearly interlinkages between the different proposed actions.

A. Test methods of harmonising national reporting nationally and internationally

55. UNEP project: Following the recommendations of the workshop referred to in paragraph 40, UNEP is implementing a series of national pilot projects to assess different approaches to harmonised reporting for the global biodiversity-related treaties. These pilot projects will cover: consolidated reporting to a range of agreements; modular reporting approaches; and the link between reporting to international agreements and the state of environment reporting process. An additional pilot project will address information management to support delivery of reports, and assess the support that might be valuable from regional organisations.

[SEE PROGRESS REPORT IN ANNEX 1]

B. Test a wider-scale harmonised approach for a specific theme or issue

56. Protected areas: Many international agreements and programmes designate or recognise sites for one reason or another. These include the World Heritage Convention and the Convention on Wetlands at the international level, and European Community “Directives” on birds and habitats and the various regional seas conventions and their protocols at the regional level. Many other international agreements and programmes identify national protected area systems as key tools for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre is working with other UN agencies (particularly UNESCO and FAO) and with IUCN on a project to compile information on the world’s protected areas in a way that meets the information needs of a wide range of agreements and programmes. A key issue is the rationale behind multiple labelling of sites under Conventions and Agreements – there appears to be room for a more strategic approach here. This work is based on an ECOSOC resolution, and has the backing of the Ecosystem Conservation Group.

[SEE PROGRESS REPORT IN ANNEX 2]

C. *Identify ways to build on the related initiatives of others*

57. Global Biodiversity Information Facility: The Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) has been established through an intergovernmental process with the aim of increasing access to the vast quantities of global biodiversity data, especially that which exists in museums and herbaria. The agreed programme priorities of GBIF are to: create an Internet-based catalogue of known names of species; digitise data on species information in museums and herbaria; create interoperability of databases and search engines for accessing these data; and build capacity in nations for implementation of GBIF. GBIF is essentially a scientific facility, and UNEP anticipates working alongside GBIF members in developing species information databases. Specifically, UNEP seeks, in co-operation with GBIF members, to enhance the quality and quantity of species-specific information available to convention secretariats and to contracting parties in support of implementation. This should also allow better and more uniform approaches to taxonomy, and taxonomic listings.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 3]

58. Other initiatives: There is a wide range of other initiatives which could also be discussed, and where an effective dialogue with those managing the initiative might lead to their work better addressing the information needs of national governments and MEA secretariats. This includes, for example, the Biodiversity Conservation Information System (BCIS), and the developing regional information networks such as the Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN).

D. *Integrate information management at the international level*

59. Review existing information sources: There are many international information sources and services already available which support the development of policy at the national level, in particular the development of policy relevant to implementation of international agreements. However these information sources and services are not necessarily all known to those who might use them, or complete. The UK Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs is therefore currently carrying out a project to review all of the available information sources and services, and to make recommendations on their better integration and areas where there are gaps.

[SEE PROGRESS REPORT IN ANNEX 4]

60. ECOLEX: Initially a collaboration between IUCN and UNEP, and now involving FAO, this Internet-based information service provides access to basic legal and adherence information on all of the environmentally-relevant international agreements (both global and regional). However this information is not linked to other information relevant to each of the agreements, and does not provide links to the websites of the convention secretariats. Also, at present, ECOLEX only includes international agreements and provides no links to the national legislation implementing each agreement within each country. Consideration needs to be given to how the existing service can be extended to serve the needs of convention secretariats and contracting parties.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 5]

61. Species information: There are several components of biodiversity and the actions taken to conserve it that are relevant to a wide range of international agreements. For example, species are listed in the annexes to CITES and CMS, the Bern Convention and the EC Birds and Habitats Directives, the SPAW Protocol to the Cartagena Convention. Many other organisations also deliver species information over the Internet, including IUCN, UNEP (especially UNEP-WCMC) and numerous national agencies. In addition programmes on specific issues also deliver information such as the Global Register of Migratory Species, the Global Invasive Species

Programme and the Association for Biodiversity Information. Collaborative programmes need to be developed to use the power of the Internet to link information in a manner that is useful. The ultimate aim is to develop integrated information systems that serve the needs of a wide range of international agreements and programmes.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 6]

E. Improve access to the experience of others

62. Case studies and lessons learned: Within the files and archives of MEAs are the valuable results of case studies, research projects and successful (and unsuccessful) practices related to habitat rehabilitation, legislative provision, species re-introduction, policy development, protected area management, sustainable tourism and so on. In many cases these are submitted in direct response to calls for case studies and other information. A number of tools are now available to make this valuable experience more accessible. Some of these case studies are already available through individual MEA websites, but not in a consistent or co-ordinated manner. The concept is to take steps to develop a “Lessons Learned Library” shared between the MEAs that provides a collection of relevant, exemplary case studies indexed and easily accessible.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 7]

F. Ensure that national reports and key assessments together cover the “Big Picture”

63. Assessing the “big picture”: Between them the biodiversity-related treaties call for a wide range of reports covering a significant range of issues. But when all these pieces are put together, how complete is the picture of the status of the world’s biological diversity and the actions taken to ensure its conservation and sustainable development? The aim of this concept is to review the reporting requirements of the key international agreements, with a view to identifying how the range of reports presents the “big picture”, and what else would be required to complete it, including information from other major assessment projects (Millennium Assessment, GEO, GIWA) and national level State of the Environment reporting.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 8]

G. Organised inventory of obligations

64. Reporting obligations: The aim of this project, which has already been initiated by the European Environment Agency, is to develop a detailed consolidated inventory of all obligations placed on contracting parties to report information to international environmental conventions. The information will be compiled in the form of an annotated list of specific information elements demanded (directly or implicitly) by each obligation instrument (convention, protocol, agreement, directive, etc). The obligations would also be key-worded using a standardised thesaurus as to subject matter, and linked to information on schedule and periodicity of regular reports. The inventory would be structured as a searchable database that links the information required to the text of the legal authority for the obligation (e.g. convention article or formal decision) and to geographic scope.

[SEE PROGRESS REPORT IN ANNEX 9]

X. Other potential supporting and demonstration actions

65. The following paragraphs provide a range of possible additional supporting actions for investigation and consideration. Some of these are already underway, others would require an input of resources before they could be undertaken if they were thought to be useful actions.

66. Joint website of the biodiversity-related conventions: This webpage was established two years ago as a mechanism for locating related information on each of the five convention websites, but has fallen into abeyance. The website will be resurrected as a collaborative exercise between UNEP and the five treaty secretariats.

67. “Handbook” to reporting, incorporating existing formats, rationale and timetables: Reporting instructions for contracting parties vary widely between treaties. Contents specification, reporting formats, guidance and interpretation may be found in convention articles, decisions and resolutions of conferences of the parties and subsidiary bodies, and less formal guidelines and interpretation documents circulated by secretariats. A resource that provides in one place the relevant guidelines and formats for the biodiversity-related conventions would be of practical benefit, as well as being a tool to promote harmonisation. This resource could be a published book, but is likely to be more useful as an Internet resource, possibly linked to a CD ROM for those countries which have difficulties with Internet access and use.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 10]

68. Reporting timetables: MEA secretariats might give consideration to reviewing the reporting timetables of the MEAs with a view to more careful scheduling, which would in particular benefit SIDs and other countries with relatively small infrastructures. The information might also be presented in a reporting calendar on a regular basis.

69. All national reports accessible on the Internet: The concept is to introduce a common approach across the conventions for making available information submitted by parties. Some of the elements of this include the standardisation of the approach, format and linkages of secretariat web-sites, a shared website acting as a gateway to convention specific information and harmonised methods of document managing and archiving, so that the documents can be systematically searched, transparently across MEAs. Parts of this are already being implemented by some MEA secretariats, so there are already some lessons that can be built upon.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 11]

70. Metadatabase of official documents and information papers of MEAs: The development of a metadatabase (index or directory) is proposed that would provide a means to search for any official document (including national reports) of the MEAs selected by subject keyword, time period, region etc., and obtain overview contents and instructions on how to obtain the document. This would require an agreed vocabulary for keywording and a consistent document identification system across agreements.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 12]

71. Harmonisation of terminology and classification: Important support for improved access to and usefulness of information would result from the development and/or sharing of common taxonomies, glossaries, lists of abbreviations, definitions and terminology, and the possible future adoption of cross-convention standards. Some of these, for example standard taxonomies, would be far more difficult to implement than others.

[SEE CONCEPT NOTE IN ANNEX 13]

72. Develop demonstrations of streamlined reporting through electronic means: Modern information technology has now reached a stage where it can routinely and reliably be used to make national reporting more efficient and effective. Actions are proposed to test out the use of electronic report submission, submission through prepared pro-forma reports, and multi-purpose reports with elements common to several MEAs, leading to a demonstration of the concept of “virtual reporting”. This will build on and promote many of the activities already being carried out by convention secretariats, helping to ensure more wide use of the lessons being learnt.

XI. Mechanisms for improving institutional interlinkages at the international level

73. Achieving many of the actions noted above and maintaining the successes will require standing linkages between the MEAs in a number of areas, including *inter alia*:
- further harmonisation and interlinkages of websites and other information dissemination
 - consistency on information management practices and technologies
 - co-ordination of scientific methodology considerations (such as indicators)
 - co-ordination of the use of nomenclature, definitions, harmonisation of taxonomies, etc.
 - developing and co-ordinating a joint capacity building programme in information management and related Internet technology
 - management of a shared lessons-learned library
74. In the short term improved institutional interlinkages may be accomplished through the UNEP synergies meetings, *ad hoc* meetings of technical bodies of the MEAs, and collaboration between secretariats both bilaterally and multilaterally. In the longer term, structural changes are required to make these linkages effective and permanent. An assessment of needs for interagency standing subsidiary bodies is called for - particularly in the areas of information management. Unifying or sharing scientific support bodies should be examined as well, especially with regard to taxonomy. Also, recognising that secretariats often have limited resources in information systems, it potentially would be operationally efficient to jointly engage specialised service providers to support these endeavours.

[SEE RECOMMENDATIONS IN ANNEX 15]

75. Further to this, a key point to bear in mind is that harmonisation of implementation of the different MEAs is a far more important issue. Harmonisation of information management and reporting are tools for furthering this process. This paper deals with one part of a far larger issue.

XII. National coordination mechanisms

76. Improved co-ordination of convention implementation at the national level is essential for efficient and effective response to all of the international obligations that countries have taken on. Integration of information management at the national level is one tool for achieving this, and for delivering reports in a better manner. Various mechanisms can be used to work towards greater co-ordination at the national level. Some examples are provided below.
77. Exchange of information: The national focal point (or equivalent) for each convention ensures that his or her counterparts for other conventions receive relevant information. This is a fairly passive process, and while it should lead to recognition of areas of potential overlap, it does not lead to a synergistic approach to implementation of the conventions. There is also the danger that divergent policies may develop on international issues. This sort of mechanism is unlikely to foster moves to streamline and harmonize reporting.
78. Periodic co-ordination meetings: The national focal points (or equivalent) meet periodically to exchange information and discuss areas of common interest. This is probably the most frequent mechanism for coordination currently, and can lead to a more integrated approach to convention implementation if properly managed. At its highest level, these meetings can discuss policy and issues ahead of meetings of the conferences of parties to ensure an integrated approach. These

coordination meetings could also ensure a more integrated approach to reporting if given the right advice internationally.

79. Convention co-ordination office: An individual or group of individuals is assigned the role of ensuring coordination. This is an effective mechanism provided the individual has the necessary authority and budgets to ensure action can take place. One would assume that to be efficient it would probably be combined with periodic coordination meetings convened by the coordination office. Such a mechanism could certainly facilitate increased coordination in preparation and delivery of reports at the national level.
80. Common national focal point: An individual or a single team assumes the role of national focal point to more than one international convention. In small island states this is a common occurrence, but not in larger countries with more complex bureaucracies. The result tends to be that the individual is overburdened, but this has the corollary that he or she is very open to any action that increases harmonization and streamlining.
81. Integrated programmes and strategies: Development of a common approach to implementation of one or more international conventions within a country, with organisations working to a single integrated programme or strategy. This approach could be combined with any of the above-mentioned mechanisms, and would clearly lead to greater integration at the national level. This could result from or lead to greater integration and the international level. Finally, it is important to recognise that a key component of integration, whether of action, policy development or reporting, is the integration of information management that forms the basis for assessment, priority setting, decision making and reporting.

