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UNEP Knowledge Management meeting – Workshop on harmonization of reporting

**Friday 16 June 2006
Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, UK**

Attendees

Nick Davidson (Ramsar); Gerardo Fragoso (UNEP-WCMC); Magnus Grylle (FAO); Jerry Harrison (UNEP-WCMC, chair); Peter Herkenrath (UNEP-WCMC); Douglas Hykle (CMS/IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU); Bert Lenten (UNEP/AEWA); Olivier de Munck (CBD); Rob Pople (UNEP-WCMC, minutes); Dave Pritchard (Ramsar STRP); Marcos Silva (CITES); Jerry Velasquez (UNEP DEC); Lynn Wagner (ENB); James Williams (JNCC); Michael Williams (UNEP/IUC); Liu Yuan (CITES).

Introduction and workshop objectives

Following welcome and introductory comments from Jerry Harrison and brief introductions from the other attendees, Jerry Velasquez outlined the background to the workshop, and summarised the timescales and scope of the current UNEP project to strengthen the capacity of developing countries for the implementation of MEAs. Harmonization of reporting was a subsection of this project, and US\$350,000 had been set aside for this part. He noted that the aims of the workshop were two-fold: to discuss the current situation regarding harmonization and options for the future; and to provide specific feedback on how the UNEP project can help take this forward.

Harmonization of reporting: past and current activities

Peter Herkenrath opened the general discussions with a presentation on past and current activities on harmonization of reporting. This outlined the underlying purposes of, and challenges to, reporting, summarised previous work carried out on harmonization, and highlighted the various recent COP mandates for harmonization. A number of challenges were identified, including: the different reporting cycles of conventions; the specific nature of some of the information needed by conventions; and the range of national agencies involved in reporting. A number of potentially promising approaches were also highlighted, namely: joint reporting portals (e.g. the reporting portal of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests); the 'modular approach'; the 'core report' concept (as used by the human rights treaties); and joint thematic reporting formats (such as the proposed CBD–Ramsar reporting framework on inland water ecosystems). In addition, he highlighted the trend to move from process-oriented towards outcome-oriented reporting and the development of online reporting systems (e.g. IOSEA) as two recent developments of particular relevance.

Subsequent group discussions acknowledged the increasing reporting burden facing parties, and reiterated the need to take tangible steps to reduce this. The importance of identifying a core set of essential information required from parties was stressed, as was the need to avoid over-complicated reporting formats or unnecessary requests for redundant information. It was noted that reports needed to solicit the intended information, and that this was best obtained by simple reporting formats with clear guidelines on what information is required. The problems of non-reporting and untimely submission of reports were discussed, particularly their implications for the analysis and synthesis of responses from parties. It was noted that the development of online reporting might encourage a more constant (less 'boom-and-bust') pattern of reporting, but also that a deadline for reports further in advance of the COP (e.g. prior to the preceding meeting of the relevant subsidiary body) could provide a more complete – albeit slightly less up-to-date – picture of the current implementation of, and future priorities for, conventions. Another potential benefit of online reporting was identified as the more immediate and conspicuous display of the information. The importance of parties being able to see how their submissions are used by the convention was once again highlighted.

The current trend for reporting formats increasingly to reflect the content and structure of strategic plans was noted, and it was pointed out that the proposed work on interoperability of strategic plans would hence be relevant. It was also noted that some attempt had been made in the past to encourage parties to use the report format as a planning tool (e.g. by Ramsar), but that this had met with limited success. It was suggested that this might in part have been due to the political complications of parties making firm commitments with regards to future action. There was some discussion of the need to clarify how, and by whom, the development of harmonized reporting formats would be taken forward (e.g. by secretariats, subsidiary bodies, working groups, and/or parties), noting that engagement by all parties was not feasible, and could significantly limit the rate of progress. James Williams indicated that the UK would potentially be willing to help develop new reporting formats.

The distinction between obtaining a comprehensive assessment of a situation and gaining an impression of key issues was stressed, noting that selective sample indicators may be most appropriate for directing policy. The trend for more outcome-oriented reporting was again highlighted, but there was some discussion of the capacity of parties to provide this information, and the extent to which it should be supplemented by input from other competent bodies. It was noted that there was also a need to explain better to parties the purposes of process-oriented reporting, including the ways it can be used to clarify whether trends arising from outcome-oriented indicators reflect implementation.

In addition to harmonization at the secretariat level, it was stressed that equally important is the need for harmonization of information collation and management at the national level. It was noted that in many countries there is no clear system to deal with reporting obligations, and that reporting often falls outside the core responsibilities of national agency staff. It was noted that a SPREP project, funded by Australia, was currently looking at the issue of national reporting systems and capacity in the Pacific region. Even in well-resourced countries, it was acknowledged that the burden on focal points could be very heavy, but it was hoped that this could be eased by a move towards online reporting, whereby the focal point could more easily delegate responsibility for specific sections of the report to relevant experts.

Future work on harmonization: the UNEP project

Peter Herkenrath gave a short presentation on the remit, background and proposed implementation of the UNEP project 2006/7, stressing its focus on developing the capacity of developing countries to implement MEAs. Five potential steps in project implementation had been identified: co-operation and regular liaison with the convention secretariats; review of the current state of reporting (building on the 2005 UNEP-WCMC review for Defra); review of information management guidelines (updating the 1998 WCMC Handbooks on Biodiversity Information Management); identification of approaches for more efficient and harmonized reporting; and identification of pilot projects (in three regions) to test the application of biodiversity information management guidelines and approaches to harmonized reporting. He concluded the presentation with three questions for further discussion: how can the involvement of convention secretariats be secured; what approaches should be tested in pilot countries; and what countries could be proposed as pilots?

Views from the MEAs and initiatives

Olivier de Munck opened the session with a presentation on the experiences of the CBD with respect to reporting. The presentation highlighted the evolution of the convention's national and thematic reports, the function of the online national report analyser, and recent Decisions relating to national reporting. The latter notably included: an invitation to Ramsar to take the lead in developing a draft reporting framework on the biodiversity of inland water ecosystems; the decision to make the fourth national report more outcome-oriented (focusing more on status and trends); encouragement to parties to harmonize data gathering and management at the national level; the decision to establish an online reporting/planning tool through the CHM for voluntary use by parties; the improvement of the reporting guidelines; the organisation of regional workshops to support parties. He highlighted that the deadline for feedback on the new draft guidelines was the end of June, and clarified that the proposed regional workshops were intended both to assist parties with the preparation of reports, and to allow parties to discuss best practice. It was noted that the World Heritage Convention also has an extensive process of regional workshops to assist parties with the completion of their reports.

Nick Davidson then gave an update on the experiences of the Ramsar Convention. He explained that national reporting is not foreseen in the articles in the Convention but that an early COP decision had introduced reporting into the Convention's process. He indicated that Ramsar national reports have grown in size and complexity over the years, but that COP9 had requested a simplified format and 'no net increase in reporting burden for parties' for COP10. He noted that an electronic reporting format had been developed over recent years, but that reporting was not online. He explained that global and regional syntheses of the information provided by parties were presented to COPs, but that they were not usually available in time for pre-COP regional meetings. He noted that the vast majority of the information requested still related to process indicators, but that there was an opportunity to include more status and trend information in the new reporting format. The new format (and the next strategic plan) was to be drafted by a subgroup established by the Standing Committee and then circulated for feedback from the regions for distribution in early 2008 in time for COP10 (autumn 2008). Consideration was currently being given to a simplified report format focusing on headline indicators, still allowing Parties to provide supplementary information on other areas. Once drafted, the reporting format for COP10 could be mapped against the CBD inland waters targets, and the initial results reported back to CBD SBSTTA (in early 2007), and ideally a draft reporting framework ready to go to the next CBD and Ramsar COPs in 2008. He noted that this process would be challenging, but that it was a good opportunity to test how harmonization will work in practice.

Next, Marcos Silva gave a presentation on national reporting to CITES, noting that the convention was perhaps unique in having a punitive process (i.e. suspension of trade) if parties do not comply with their reporting obligations. He explained that CITES had three different categories of reports: annual reports; biennial reports; and special reports. It was noted that the former were very specific in nature, and that the quantitative trade data they contained were made available electronically through the CITES trade database. Biennial reports have three main objectives: monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of the convention; identification of significant achievements, developments, gaps and problems; and to provide a basis for substantive and procedural decision-making by the COP and subsidiary bodies. Special reports arise from reporting requirements in specific resolutions, decisions or notifications, and may be species-specific or general in nature. During subsequent discussions, it was acknowledged that the annual reports were not well-suited for harmonization, but that there were useful lessons to be learned from the systems. Although little attention had been paid to biennial reports in the past, it was acknowledged that their content was suitable for harmonization, and that there was an opportunity to co-ordinate their further development with other conventions. It was noted that the reporting obligations of parties for the various special reports are similar, but not entirely standardised, and hence that there was room for some harmonization within CITES in this area. Marcos Silva indicated that CITES was keen to explore the potential of online submission of national and biennial reports in the future.

Douglas Hykle then gave a demonstration of the online reporting facility of the CMS/IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU. He explained that the Editor function provides a series of carefully-structured text and tick-box questions, which are supported with help fields that provide guidance on what is expected in responses. The system is designed to allow multiple users to collaborate over the internet in the compilation of sections of the report. The system comprises two databases – one with 'work in progress' (not publicly viewable), and one 'live' that displays information once it has been approved by the secretariat. The system automatically alerts the secretariat whenever a change is made to any report. A publicly accessible Viewer function allows users to query the database using a range of search options, including viewing full reports or pulling out information on specific themes, species, sites, etc. He then highlighted some of the other back-end functions available to the secretariat, including tools for editing and 'publishing' reports; monitoring, reviewing and approving Signatory submissions; and various other administrative functions. He went on to profile a unique evaluation tool that objectively rates signatory responses in order to assess implementation (and reporting) of specific activities. The tool facilitates the synthesis of an overall report on implementation, and generates a numerically-based matrix representing Signatory performance in relation to 24 programmes of work. This can be used to identify strengths and potential gaps in reporting and implementation. He finished by noting that priorities for future work include: assisting Signatories to improve their reporting; incorporating information from other sources; developing further analytical tools and links to the UNEP-WCMC / IOSEA Interactive Mapping System (IMapS); and integrating IOSEA and CMS-level reporting.

Bert Lenten then gave a brief update on other developments within the CMS family. He noted that at its last MOP AEWA had adopted a resolution to develop an online national report format, and that CMS was also

investigating the potential for online reporting and changes to its national report format. He highlighted that CMS had submitted a proposal to UNEP DEC for the 'SONAR 2010' project, which aims to develop a system of online national reporting within the CMS family. He stressed that the project would investigate how the information submitted to agreements could be integrated into CMS, and that lessons learnt from the project could inform the process of future harmonization with the other conventions.

Following lunch, Magnus Grylle gave a presentation on the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), explaining its origins and background, and highlighting the work of its task force on streamlining forest-related reporting. He explained that the latter had identified the main bodies reported to on forest-related issues, and, for each body, provided details online of what information they collect. The reports to these bodies can be queried online by process, by country and in future also by thematic element. The web site also provides links through to lists of national focal points for the different bodies, as well as a reporting schedule of major forest-related international processes. He noted that agreement had been reached on continued maintenance of the CPF reporting portal, developing capacity at the national level, and increasing co-ordination in information collection (with a special focus on the 2010 target). Proposed elements within the latter include: joint information requests; identification of current gaps in information; closer networking at national and international level; and the establishment of a CPF repository of the forestry information submitted to these bodies. Further discussions noted that this type of portal is well suited for thematic topics, and highlighted some of the similarities with the approach of the UNEP Issue Based Modules project (which currently focuses 'only' on MEAs).

Finally, James Williams gave a presentation outlining the UK's experience with harmonization of reporting. He highlighted the considerable project planning needed to co-ordinate the inputs and feedback from the various relevant agencies and departments, but noted that the timing of certain steps in this co-ordination process were beyond his control. He stressed the problems of capacity arising from synchrony of reporting deadlines, and reiterated that the overall reporting burden continues to grow. He indicated that although much data was available on UK biodiversity, only some of this is currently used in the reporting process, and that this subset of data still needs repackaging in order to fit the different reporting formats. He finished by identifying the key challenges: reduction of the overall reporting burden; the problem of synchrony of reporting deadlines; making reports more outcome-based; increased use of indicators (more data and less text); and integration of information into assessments. The subsequent discussion focused on: the balance between categorical and textual answers; the importance of good questionnaire design; and problems arising from (often subtle) changes in questions – and hence responses – between reporting cycles.

The way forward

It was noted that inland waters (CBD–Ramsar), dry and sub-humid lands (CBD–UNCCD) and reporting within the CMS family had all been identified as possibilities for inclusion in the UNEP project, and generally acknowledged that these proposed trials of harmonization could provide invaluable lessons for the design of further cross-linkages between MEAs. Participants reiterated the need for exercises such as these to generate tangible reductions in the reporting burden, to demonstrate to parties that harmonization is indeed possible in practice. It was highlighted that it would also be good to include a focus in pilot projects on status and trends in biodiversity, which could provide input into, for instance, the 2010 target. It was explained that the CBD and UNCCD secretariats had approached UNEP DEC for support to implement the joint work programme between the two conventions, of which joint reporting on dry and sub-humid lands is a part.

It was commented that it would also be useful for UNEP-WCMC to circulate a review of the progress made on the recommendations of the Haasrode workshop, and that one of these was to update the biodiversity information management guidelines, which could be tested in pilot countries within the UNEP project. Following up on the recommendations from Haasrode was seen as an essential part of future activities on harmonization. A need for greater co-ordination and interaction (potentially electronically) between national reporting focal points was also noted, as well as the potential for the identification of good examples of reporting.

There was considerable discussion of the desirability of identifying areas of common interest between conventions as a basis for harmonized reporting, but it was noted that efforts to do this in the past (e.g. within the UNEP-WCMC review for Defra) had found a fair amount of overlap at the general level, but limited overlap when looking at the level of specific questions. It was also stressed that attempts to 'map' detailed

cross-linkages between conventions was problematic, not least because of ongoing amendments to reporting formats. Suggestions to mitigate the latter included the potential ‘freezing’ of core sections within reporting formats, and the establishment of a cross-convention committee (possibly under the auspices of the Biodiversity Liaison Group) that monitors proposed changes to reporting formats, and solicits feedback from related conventions. The identification of a minimal core set of common issues that need to be reported across conventions could however be useful.

It was stressed that the pilot projects in countries should have a value in demonstrating benefits of harmonization at the national level, becoming practical projects with a ‘pay-off’. For all aspects of the UNEP project, it was recommended to include advice from national experts.

Finally, the group identified key aspects for the UNEP project as follows:

- Establishing dialogue between secretariats on formulation of report formats and areas of common interest across conventions (such as Strategic Plans and core report; informed by 2-4 below)
- Harmonization/integration within CMS family
- Inland waters (CBD & Ramsar)
- Drylands (CBD & UNCCD)

The pilot/demonstration projects in developing countries should focus on the following aspects:

- Receiving input from the areas identified above
- Testing the Biodiversity Information Management Guidelines in the context of capacity building, linked to existing MEA-related initiatives
- Partnering with existing initiatives (e.g. Asia and Pacific, SPREP)

Involving key national experts and addressing outcome-oriented indicators were identified as cross-cutting issues for all activities.

Concluding remarks

Jerry Velasquez thanked participants for the fruitful discussions, adding that far more had been achieved than he had expected. He noted that there was agreement on several projects, and that it should be possible to come up with something concrete. He added that he was still open to further suggestions, and that resources could still be available for really good ones. An outline of the envisaged UNEP project on harmonization would be circulated to workshop participants next week. Jerry Harrison closed the meeting in thanking UNEP DEC for promoting new and practical approaches that support the implementation of multilateral environmental agreements.