

# 4 Steps for Targeted Coherence

## A Modular Approach

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One of the challenges identified in *Global Environmental Governance: A Reform Agenda* (see <http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2006/geg.pdf>) is the lack of cooperation and coordination among international organizations. As we argued in that 2006 book, the search for system-wide coordination is an impossible challenge. After all, environment touches everything and therefore all international organizations have a role to play. Instead of trying to devise structures for “deep coordination” among a large number of agencies, we believe the coherence challenge needs to be addressed by breaking it up into bite-size pieces.

To this end, this paper outlines a set of practical proposals to enhance inter-agency coherence on environmental issues. In particular, it seeks to identify ways in which the UN Environmental Management Group (EMG) can be reformed to increase the coherence of the Global Environmental Governance (GEG) system.

**By Adil Najam and Miquel Muñoz**

Our proposals are premised on the idea that not everything needs to be coordinated all the time, and it is far more effective to focus our energies on those issues and activities where inter-agency coherence is most needed or likely to produce the most desirable results.

In particular, the four targeted steps suggested in this paper are politically doable and worth doing, in that they will improve institutional coherence for improved global environmental governance. These steps may not solve the “problem of coherence” in its entirety, but they could nudge the system towards improvement.

## 4 Steps for Targeted Coherence

It is not surprising that many previous efforts to improve global environmental coherence have tried to induce “deep” system-wide environmental coordination within the international system, and have not succeeded. Indeed, the international system is itself so unwieldy that efforts at deep or perfect coordination are not likely to be terribly successful. It is not even clear if such coordination is even desirable.

This, however, does not mean that nothing should be done. Indeed, coordination within the UN system, and coherence in its actions has long and rightly been identified as necessary for improving UN efficiency and effectiveness, and not only in the environmental field. What is needed is not more “stringent” coordination, but a more nuanced recognition of what type of coherence is most useful for what purposes, among which agencies, and how. In essence, we need to move from “full system coordination” to “targeted coherence.”

By targeted coherence we imply a system where instead of seeking broad-based and general coordination, we seek coherence between specific agencies, for specific tasks, on specific issues and in specific ways. Coherence implies that agencies move in the same direction; but not necessarily on the same path. Coherence suggests that agencies should share a vision. Coherence requires regular communication among organizations, and reasonable coordination on particular issues. However, coherence does not require a “super-organization” for the environment, nor does it require a central control mechanism to coordinate every environmental action of every organization in the international system.

### EMG and CEB

Let us now look at the mechanisms of inter-agency environmental coordination that currently exist. In essence there are two broad-based and a large number of specific mechanisms.

The UN Environment Management Group (EMG), since its first meeting in 2001, has sought to enhance UN system-wide inter-agency coordination on environment and human settlement. The Geneva-based EMG is hosted and managed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and has 44 members. The two main instruments of the EMG consist of its annual meeting and its *ad hoc* Issue Management Groups (IMGs). While the EMG has been involved in some successes, such as harmonized reporting for biodiversity conventions and the recent UN Carbon Neutral Initiative, its annual meeting is regarded by many as a fruitless exercise that serves only to highlight the difficulties of inter-agency coordination within the UN system.

The EMG is not the sole UN coordination mechanism on environmental issues. The UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) is devoted to further cooperation on a whole range of substantive and management issues facing United Nations system organizations. The CEB includes two subsidiary bodies: the High Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP); and

the High Level Committee on Management (HLM). The CEB has two regular meetings per year, one in retreat-format, and includes heads of UN agencies. While the CEB’s coordination mandate is wider than environmental issues, environment, and particularly climate change, has been playing an ever-growing role in recent years.

EMG and CEB memberships are shown in Table 1, which shows a clear overlap between the institutions.

Table 1: EMG and CEB Membership

EMG only		Dual EMG / CEB		CEB only
CBD	OCHA	FAO	UNHCR	IMF
CITES	OHCHR	IAEA	UNICEF	UNODC
CMS	Ramsar	ICAO	UNIDO	UNRWA
ECA	SBC	IFAD	UPU	
ECE	UNCCD	ILO	WFP	
ECLAC	UNDESA/DSD	IMO	WHO	
ESCAP	UNFCCC	ITU	WIPO	
ESCWA	UN-HABITAT	UNCTAD	WMO	
GEF	UNITAR	UNDP	World Bank	
ISDR	UNU	UNEP	WTO (trade)	
ITC		UNESCO	WTO (tourism)	
		UNFPA		

In addition to EMG and CEB, there exist a multitude of issue-related inter-agency initiatives with an explicit mandate of coordination or coherence. Some, like the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), have a broad mandate within which the environment features prominently; others are quite precise in their mandates. A few examples are:

- UN-WATER, aims to coordinate agency efforts in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related to water.
- UN-ENERGY aims to help ensure coherence in the UN system’s response to energy-related World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) decisions.
- UN-OCEANS, hosted by UNESCO, is an inter-agency coordination mechanism on ocean and coastal issues within the UN.
- Collaborative Partnership on Forests, hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), aims to enhance coordination on forest issues.
- International Programme on Chemical Safety, hosted by the World Health Organization (WHO), coordinates work on chemical safety.
- Joint Liaison Group is an informal forum for exchanging information and increasing coordination among the Rio Conventions (and Ramsar).

The first three in the list above are part of the HLCP and were set up by the CEB as a follow-up to the WSSD in 2002.

The existence of so many different efforts to improve coherence makes a loud point about the system and about the difficulties in seeking deep coordination. What we have is a system with a large number of unlike agencies. Coordination in such a system is not like herding cats, but more like bringing together elephants, eagles, tigers and dolphins.

## Different Organizations Have Different Coherence Needs

We believe that the different types of organizations that make up the GEG system have very different coherence needs. Because the GEG system is composed of a large set of dissimilar institutions with very different environmental mandates, resource profiles and action arenas, it is not wise to lump all of them together or to try coordinating the activities of all of them simultaneously.

It is readily apparent that the interests and priorities of EMG organizations are widely spread and, in many cases, there is no common ground or interest between two particular organizations. For example, when put together at an EMG annual meeting, the Universal Postal Union representative might find little to talk about with the representatives of the Convention on Migratory Species or UNCTAD. There is not only little point in bringing together organizations with limited common interests, but yet worse, there is a high opportunity cost which can detract from meaningful coordination and coherence-building steps that could otherwise have happened in a more focused format.

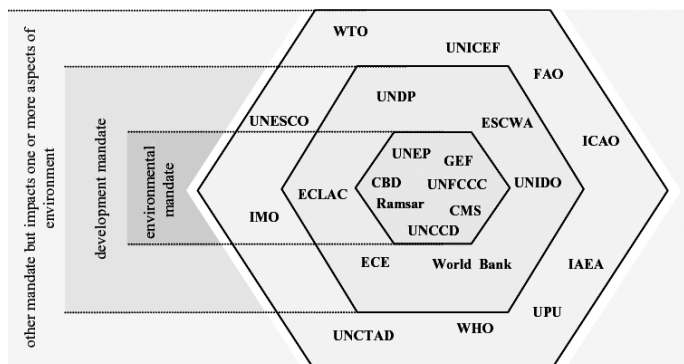
We should start, instead, by distinguishing between different types of organizations and their differing coherence needs. A quick glance at the membership of the EMG and the CEB reflects the variety, in size, clout and, most important, in the nature of EMG organizations and, by extension, actors in the GEG system.

In particular we can distinguish three types of agency/organization:

1. Organizations whose mandate is primarily environmental, such as UNEP, GEF, MEA secretariats, etc.;
2. Organizations whose mandate is primarily development, sustainable development, or project implementation, and therefore have a strong environmental component, such as UNDP, the World Bank, Regional Development Banks; and
3. Organizations whose primary mandate is not environment or sustainable development, but nevertheless might have significant impact on one or more environmental issues, such as ICAO, IMO, UNESCO or WHO.

These three types of relationship to the environment are illustrated graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Tiered Mandates



We should stress that the agencies identified in the diagram are exemplars and much deeper analysis is required to exactly determine which organization should be in which part of the diagram. The point here is not to discuss the role of particular agencies but only to highlight that there are different “types” of organizations that make up the GEG system.

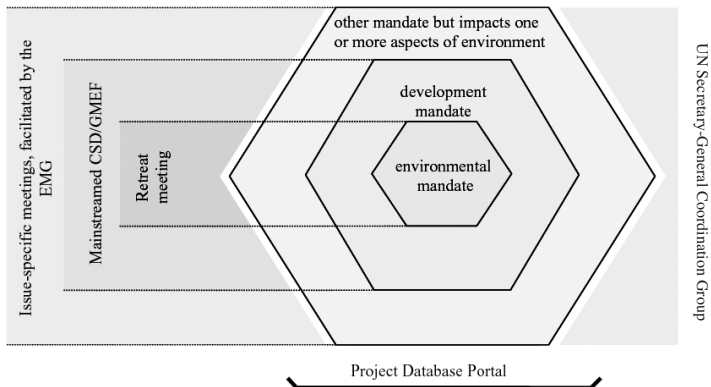
Based on the schema presented in Figure 1, we propose that given the diverging and diverse natures of the actors in the GEG system, it is more appropriate to have a multi-tiered set of mechanisms to suit the different types of actors and agencies, rather than trying to coordinate all activities of all actors in one place, i.e., the EMG. We suggest taking the mega-structure for coherence and re-aligning the tasks into a set of different coherence-building activities that are individually more manageable and which, collectively, add up to more effective and meaningful environmental coherence than is now achieved under the EMG umbrella. The next section will outline a menu of four such steps.

## Four Steps Towards Targeted Inter-agency Coherence

Beginning from a differentiated sense of the GEG system as outlined above, we suggest a set of differentiated steps, designed for different types of organizations and for different coherence needs. Each of the proposed coordination mechanisms seeks to address a different aspect or dimensions of inter-agency coordination and coherence. We begin here with four such steps.

1. Elevating the environment on the CEB agenda
2. A yearly retreat meeting for environmental leaders
3. Issue-specific task forces
4. GEG Project Database Portal

Figure 2: Tiered Responsibilities



## 1. Elevating the environment on the CEB agenda

The CEB is, by definition, a high-level meeting that brings together the top leaders in the UN system to discuss, plan and coordinate their vision, agenda and activities in related areas. Environment is already on the agenda of the CEB, and is an increasingly important aspect of that agenda. The suggestion here is to take the high-level aspects of institutional vision and leadership out of the existing EMG and place it explicitly on the agenda of the CEB. This underscores the existing priorities of the CEB, but does not change the mandate of the CEB. More importantly, it relieves the EMG of the expectation to do things that it is not suited to do.

Questions of institutional vision and direction are best tackled at the highest leadership level and it makes sense for this discussion to happen at the CEB level, and under the direct guidance of the UN Secretary-General. Such discussion cannot be operational and should focus only on issues of institutional policy and direction. The goal is to create a shared vision of where we want our overall GEG efforts to go. Although the environment is already discussed at the CEB, the inclusion of environmental issues in the CEB agenda on a regular basis is one way to ensure that those issues remain on the radar of the agency leaders, that agencies have an expectation that environmental aspects will be discussed at the CEB and, therefore, will appropriately prepare for that discussion.

## 2. A yearly retreat meeting for environmental leaders

The coherence challenges of organizations whose primary purpose is environmental—UNEP, various multilateral environmental agreement (MEA) secretariats, etc.—are

significantly different than the coherence challenges of other organizations. Coherence, in this case, requires much more substantive coordination. For example, on how forest institutions and climate change institutions will deal with the interactions between the two; or how institutions dealing with biodiversity will interact. A forum that includes all agencies—including many for whom such environmental concerns are only a small part of their mandate—is not the most appropriate forum for such coordination.

We suggest, therefore, to formalize an annual retreat of the heads of environmental agencies, MEA secretariats, environmental funds and other institutions whose primary mission relates directly and predominantly to environmental concerns. To be successful, these retreats should (a) be regular; (b) be restricted to only those institutions for whom the environment is *the* key mission; and (c) be at the level of the highest leadership within these institutions.

One of the challenges is how to bring together the leaders, who usually are very time-constrained. Two requirements are necessary: first, we need a relevant agenda, with key themes interesting to all leaders attending; second, we need leadership to ensure the high-level attendance to the meeting. It is suggested, therefore, that these meetings be hosted each year by a particular country, at a high-level, and with a clear sense of agenda direction coming from the host country. We envisage that the retreat meetings can be interesting tools for proactive governments wishing to promote a particular GEG issue. Depending on the agenda focus, the heads of agencies *without* a strictly environmental purpose could be invited (e.g., the head of WTO).

## 3. Issue-specific task forces

A particular type of inter-agency coherence is required at the local, national and regional level on specific projects and initiatives. However, a central coordinating body like the EMG is not particularly suited to creating such coherence. Such coherence is much better achieved at the local, national and regional levels themselves. We propose that this should be done through the creation of issue-specific task forces established for the sole purpose of inter-agency coherence on specific projects and initiatives.

In this case, the key task is not really to bring the institutional leadership in sync. The much more important goal is to give the field and technical staff working on that specific project or initiative a chance to coordinate their actions, learn from each other and create working

synergies among the actions of different institutions. These task forces should be created on an *ad hoc* and as-needed basis. These would be task-focused efforts and we envision such meetings would begin at the technical level. At the regional and national levels—especially when oriented towards particular programs, projects or initiatives—these task forces should use existing UN coordination mechanisms such as the UN Resident Representative’s office or Agency Regional Coordinators to facilitate their work. Task forces could also be set up at a global level for specific issues. For example, these could be global issues such as emissions from aviation or toy safety, etc.

Importantly, there are already existing efforts aimed at creating better UN inter-agency coordination at the local and regional levels. Our proposal, therefore, needs to be streamlined within the existing efforts for better development coordination at the regional level. This is a task that is of great practical importance because it deals with implementation. Yet, historically, the EMG has not been involved in such coordination because it meets at the global level whereas implementation is often at the national and regional levels. This step, therefore, adds a layer of coordination to the GEG enterprise, which has largely been missing.

#### 4. GEG Project Database Portal

Coherence comes from leadership, from institutional structures and from implementation mechanisms, but it also comes from information. This fourth step seeks to create practical and useful coherence in the realm of information. The idea is to move towards improved knowledge sharing and knowledge coherence, and we suggest that a Project Database Portal (PDP) may be a good first step in this direction.

Worldwide, there are scores of projects related in one way or another to the Global Environmental Governance system. Most of those projects, as well as some information on them, can be found in one or more of several databases and

listings maintained by different UN agencies, MEA secretariats and other international organizations. Those databases and listings range from very large, such as the GEF Project Database or OECD CRS; to the medium, such as the UNFCCC CDM or CSD Partnerships databases; to the very small, such as the Private Financing Advisory Network (PFAN), and span all sorts of issues and organizations.

Currently there is no single “one-window” approach to find out about existing projects under the GEG system. Such a one-window tool would enhance information exchange, and hence coordination, among GEG agencies. What we are proposing is a portal to aggregate databases on GEG projects. The portal would allow searches through existing databases from a centralized Web site. This portal would not replicate, duplicate or substitute existing databases, each one having its own hosting arrangements, singularities and *raison d’être*. Rather, the proposed portal would act in an analogous way as an airfare aggregator, where users perform a search and the aggregator scans hundreds of airline ticketing systems, redirecting the user to the relevant places.

In this way, if someone wanted to know about existing projects in particular environmental areas, rather than spending time looking all major databases one by one, and then spend even more time combing the minor databases and project listings, they could instead conduct their search in the GEG Project Database Portal, which would direct the user to the relevant databases. Existing databases would see their effectiveness increased, the way airline companies see their sales increased by on-line aggregators.

This task could be carried out by a reconverted EMG secretariat or by another body of UNEP. Obvious synergies exist between the PDP and the proposed Global Environmental Financing Tracking (GEFT) Register proposed in our Tracking Environmental Financing Proposal (another brief in this series). Therefore, close coordination would be advisable.

### Building Coherence: One Step at a Time

The international system has long tried to solve the “problem” of coordination by creating elaborate structures and rules designed to make the international system work in perfect synchronicity. None of these efforts have worked. We believe that such an approach is neither doable nor desirable.

We believe that a much better approach is to tailor our solutions to the specific coherence needs or specific types of institutions and to make the coherence burden as small as

possible on each individual institution. The four small steps that we are proposing here are not the only steps that can be taken. But, hopefully, they can at least make the GEG system more coordinated than it now is. These are doable propositions, and these are steps in the right direction. Hopefully, such steps can lead to more elaborate steps for even better coherence.

It should be recognized, however, that ultimately coherence depends on countries. Governments give agencies mandate in their respective governing bodies, and leadership by countries

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is necessary to make coordination and coherence on environmental issues a relevant consideration for agencies. This does not, however, take all responsibility away from agencies, who can undertake many measures—such as the ones proposed here—on their own, and influence governments through increased information on coherence benefits.

From a practical perspective, to be successful our proposals require:

- **Reorganization of EMG.** As we argued, the annual EMG meeting should be discarded in its present form. Instead, a strengthened EMG secretariat should be charged with implementing the four steps outlined here and any other positive steps towards GEG coherence.
- **Leadership** is an essential ingredient for any of our proposed mechanisms to work. Leadership will be needed at the UN level, for the CEB and retreat meetings. Leadership will be needed at the agency level, for the Project Database Portal and issue-specific task forces. Leadership will be needed at the national level, to send the right signals to agencies, as well as to facilitate the environmental retreat meeting.
- **Minimum additional resources.** Although we are suggesting an increased number of mechanisms, the actual number of meetings is maintained, since the EMG coordination meeting is eliminated. As for the environmental leaders retreat meeting, due to agenda proliferation, there are enough high-level events in the year that the retreat meeting can be scheduled on the back of one of those. To create and maintain the Project Database Portal, as well as to facilitate issue-specific task forces, secretariat capabilities, equivalent to a strengthened EMG secretariat, would be needed.

The essence of this paper is given the diverse natures of the actors in the GEG system—and, indeed, the need to have diverse actors populate the system—it is inadvisable to seek “deep” coordination among all players, on all issues, all the time. It is much more appropriate to devise a multi-tiered set of mechanisms to suit the different types of actors. We have suggested a set of four steps that would lead the system on the path to targeted coherence—coherence among clearly identified sets of actors for clearly identified activities. These steps would constitute a doable and worth-doing set of preliminary initiatives and would, ideally, lead to other initiatives for improved targeted coherence.

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