	Towards the harmonization of national reporting to biodiversity-related treaties
UNEP WCMC	*A workshop convened by UNEP-WCMC in cooperation with the governments of Belgium and the UK Haasrode, Belgium, 22-23 September, 2004*

Workshop Report

1. Introduction

In October 2000, UNEP convened a workshop '*Towards the harmonization of national reporting*' where representatives of eight convention and agreement secretariats, eight countries and several international organizations met in Cambridge, UK to discuss options for harmonization of reporting. The needs which the workshop was seeking to address at national and international levels were:

- avoiding duplication of effort in reporting processes;
- increasing efficiency and reducing the burden of reporting; and
- improving access to reported information.

The Cambridge workshop resulted in the establishment of UNEP-sponsored pilot projects in four countries to explore different approaches to harmonization of national reporting to biodiversity-related conventions.

- Assessing the opportunities for linking national reporting to the State of the Environment reporting process (*Ghana*).
- Identifying common information modules, and using this as a basis for developing a coordinated modular approach to reporting (*Indonesia*).
- Exploring potential regional support mechanisms for national information management and associated reporting (*Panama*).
- Assessing the potential for producing a consolidated national report responding to the needs of several conventions (*Seychelles*).

Since October 2000, the importance of working on harmonization and synergies between the different Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) has been repeatedly recognized by the various governing bodies (including specific reference to these national pilot projects in some cases), and many other steps have been taken to address the issue. Harmonization of reporting as an issue has also been reviewed by the UN Environmental Management Group. For four of the five global biodiversity-related treaties, mandates for this work come from:

- Resolutions VII/4 and VIII/26 of the Conference of Parties for the Convention on Wetlands, and the Strategic Plan 2003-2008;

- Decision 12.87 of the CITES Conference of Parties, and the Strategic Vision Through 2005 adopted by Decision 11.1;
- Resolution 7.9 of the Conference of Parties for the Convention on Migratory Species, and the Information Management Plan adopted by Resolution 6.5; and
- Decisions V/19, VI/25 and VII/25 of the Conference of Parties for the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Following completion of the pilot projects, a workshop was convened by UNEP-WCMC in cooperation with the governments of Belgium and the United Kingdom, at Haasrode, Belgium, 22-23 September 2004. The workshop was attended by representatives of the five global biodiversity-related conventions, two agreement secretariats, eight countries, the European Commission, and a number of international organizations with experience in this area. The objectives of the workshop were to:

- review conclusions and recommendations from the four pilot projects;
- review the conclusions and recommendations of other recent harmonization and streamlining initiatives and the implications of other recent developments in reporting processes;
- use these inputs as a means for further identifying and clarifying mechanisms to support harmonization at the national level; and
- develop plans and set priorities for future work in this area.

2. The purpose of reporting

The reasons for periodically reporting to international conventions and agreements encompass a range of issues, including:

- demonstrating compliance and the enactment of appropriate legislation;
- developing an overview of implementation, projects and financial matters;
- identifying relationships to, and interactions with, other processes;
- reflection on work done and identification of future/further work; and
- status of biodiversity.

However, reports do not capture all of this at present, and perhaps also not in the right balance. Reporting processes for the biodiversity-related conventions and agreements rarely provide a complete overview of implementation, and there has been a focus on reporting on process rather than on outcomes - on what has been done rather than on achievement and future prognosis.

Meanwhile, there is a growing recognition by countries, convention and agreement secretariats, and other bodies that the reporting burden has been growing and doing so in an uncoordinated and uncontrolled manner. This conflicts with the view that reporting processes and the reports themselves should support implementation, particularly at the national level, rather than being seen as a burden. Improved coordination is needed at national, regional and international levels.

The workshop considered that there was a need for reporting processes at national and international levels to move to increasingly cover outcomes from action, while recognising that information on the processes and actions themselves was still necessary to underpin this. The 2010 target on reducing the current rate of biodiversity loss provides substantial impetus and a focus for beginning to effect such a change.

3. Practical lessons learnt on reporting requirements

Achieving improvements in reporting and associated information management requires attention to many aspects of the work of countries, conventions and agreements. Some of the points that relate specifically to requests for reports include the following.

i. *Purpose:* Convention governing bodies, advisory bodies and secretariats should carefully consider what they need to know from reporting, what information is required to address this and whether the information is already available. They should also make clear to parties what will be done with the reports, and how the information will be used.

Wherever possible, parties should not be expected to provide information that they themselves do not require for implementation.

ii.   *Coverage:* Linked to this, consideration should be given as to whether there is a need to report on all aspects of biodiversity and on all articles of a convention, or whether to be more focused. For example, the burden of reporting can be decreased by concentrating on what will be needed to support discussion at the next meeting of the governing body, rather than by requiring reporting across the whole breadth of a convention or agreement.

iii.   *Inter-linkages:* Consideration should also be given to the fact that information requested for one convention might address an information requirement in another convention, and appropriate steps taken to share information and approaches.

iv.   *Timing:* Consideration should be given to reporting cycles and how they relate to the reporting cycles of other conventions and agreements. Lack of coordination of reporting timetables leads to uneven workloads being placed on countries, with a heavy reporting burden in some years, and a lighter burden in others.

v.   *Convergence:* There are already examples in the forest sector through the work of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), where convention secretariats and other international organizations are working together to define practical steps that can be taken to both reduce reporting burden and increase access to the information compiled through reporting processes. This includes consideration of joint questionnaires, harmonization of terminologies, a web-based forest reporting portal (with easy access to reports and reporting formats), and a joint information framework.

vi.   *On-line reporting:* Some conventions and agreements are already experimenting with on-line reporting, and this could be explored further in the context of others. For example, the Indian Ocean - South-East Asian Marine Turtle Memorandum of Understanding has an on-line reporting form that is already being completed by countries. It is noted that this sort of approach would need to accommodate countries with less electronic and communications capacity.

The pilot projects have been very helpful in showing what can be done and in providing experience for others to learn from. Initiatives under other conventions and bodies have also been particularly helpful demonstrations of what can be done, such as the above-mentioned on-line reporting system of one of the CMS agreements, and the experiences of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) on harmonizing approaches to reporting in the forest sector.

4. Lessons learnt on shifting the focus of reporting

The desire for changes in the reporting regime has come both from top down and bottom up, from work between and within conventions and agreements, and from work within and between countries. The pilot projects have provided good examples of testing approaches for improving the harmonization of reporting, and a number of examples are given in this report. Changes that affect governing bodies, advisory bodies and secretariats in the way in which they approach reporting are particularly identified in the previous section.

The workshop also addressed two other related opportunities to move towards increased harmonization.

i.   *Links to State of the Environment reporting:* SoE reporting was seen as an opportunity to enhance communication and collaboration between sectors. Integration of biodiversity issues into other sectors and into the sustainable development and sustainable use agendas requires a drive from the top of government.

ii.   *Outcome-oriented targets and related reporting:* Establishing targets and then reporting on achievements against them offers a chance for real assessment of implementation. Adoption of the 2010 target, and recognition that it applies to a wide range of conventions, agreements and programmes provides a valuable impetus.

While some changes can be made unilaterally by conventions and agreements, some (such as a more coordinated focus on outcome-oriented reporting) will require rather more collaboration. However, all such changes will take time and commitment to achieve, and all have resource implications. In addition, introducing changes to all of the conventions and agreements in parallel is a real challenge in resource and capacity terms.
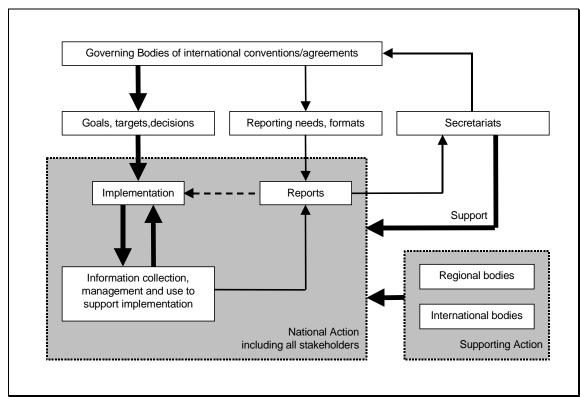
5. Information management and reporting

Improvements in information management at the national and regional level, coupled with a more coordinated approach to implementation of related conventions and agreements, were considered by the workshop to be key mechanisms for increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of implementation of the commitments and/or legal obligations under conventions and agreements to which a country is party. Reporting was necessarily a subsequent goal which should emerge from implementation and more effective information management.

There are three aspects which need to be addressed:

- what information is needed by countries to manage their biodiversity resources and to respond to the international obligations and expectations they have adopted;

- how that information should be managed on a day to day basis in a manner that ensures that the information is available and fit for purpose; and

- how information management is linked to reporting.

A flow diagram was formulated to try to demonstrate the relationships between implementation and reporting, the information management and use required to achieve it, and the role of other organizations in this process.

5.1 Identifying what information is needed

The pilot projects have clearly demonstrated that when the interests and requirements of the various biodiversity-related conventions and agreements are analysed, the activities and information requirements can be organized into a series of clusters or modules. A corollary of this is that organization of information management in a modular manner leads to more efficient information

management and use to support both implementation and reporting. Further advice is needed for countries on how to do this, based on the experience of the pilot projects.

The suggestion was also made that a State of Environment report with relevant chapters, standard modules or themes on biodiversity, might help with the process of compiling and delivering an assessment of the outcomes of implementation of internationally agreed action at the national level. Within these biodiversity modules there could be information on both status and implementation, information on all three levels of biodiversity, and natural resource information (e.g. forests, fisheries, agriculture). Such material would be focused on identified needs and priorities. These issues might be considered when existing guidelines on developing State of Environment reports are reviewed.

There are clearly close parallels between the modular approach to information management and reporting, and the incorporation of biodiversity modules into the State of Environment reporting process.

5.2 Locating and managing the information

Following assessment of information needs, a process of information and institutional mapping should enable a country to identify where information resides, who has it, what format it is in, access conditions and procedures (such as on-line searchability), and so on. In order to effectively respond to information needs for implementation of international agreements it will be necessary to ensure effective coordination of information management and use, and to ensure responsibilities are clear. For many countries this may be a significant challenge, but it is a logical and necessary process.

A centralised database is one approach often considered, but an information network is probably more effective, with a distributed approach to information management and responsibilities for data management residing with those with appropriate mandates, interests and experience. One of the goals of such an information network should clearly be to support implementation of conventions and agreements at the national level. With this in mind, it is important to ensure that the information network addresses information needs and not just information that exists, and is based on an identification of information priorities and an understanding of how information will be used.

Within the network there should be an identification of key responsibilities and a means to ensure integration/coordination perhaps by a central agency, a biodiversity committee or some other coordinating mechanism. The focal points of different MEAs should meet regularly to ensure that the information network is responding to their combined needs. With this in mind, consideration might be given to establishing an integrated clearing-house (including a metadatabase) that could provide information across the various MEAs.

Challenges to development of an effective information management process include data issues such as coverage, validation, compatibility, and so on, but far more important are the "relationship" issues between data providers, including agreements (MoUs, letters of intent, etc), ownership, conditions for access, recognition, incentives, confidence-building, and so on. An information network needs to take into account the requirements of all stakeholders, and to ensure their effective involvement.

It is recognised that regional approaches and collaboration on information networking may assist countries as they develop and implement improvements in their own information management.

5.3 Gaps/problems

Many issues were identified by the workshop as requiring attention, including terminology, data quality and validation. There may also be a need to generate new data, however potential data gaps should be verified (not just perceived), prioritized and a coordinated approach taken to fill them. This could include targeting research and monitoring efforts within a country and/or encouraging visiting foreign scientists to address the identified priorities of the country they are visiting.

Effective reporting in an information network requires sharing of information, but obstacles are often encountered, including: information being viewed as money and power; academic precedence; information guarding; concerns that sharing information may lead to loss of control; confidentiality concerns; and lack of trust. These all impact on the functioning of the information network.

A well managed national information system, facilitating reporting to conventions and agreements (or possibly even enabling convention secretariats to collect the information from a national web portal),

is expected to be beneficial to countries. However, it was also recognised that when establishing systems of information, provisions must be made for potential liability of countries under compliance regimes, which might hamper the delivery of quality information.

In all cases, confidence can be built through demonstrating good practice in the use of information, and sharing experience.

5.4 Capacity development

Improved integration at the national level, and improved management of information for both implementation and reporting, will in many cases require additional guidance, the provision of tools and other support, exchange of experience, and training. This will require the identification of both financial and technical resources, although wherever possible this will build on existing advice, guidelines and mechanisms.

Opportunities also need to be explored for regional coordination of effort in this regard. One of the pilot projects identified opportunities for countries within a region to work closely together to share experience and to work together in developing the tools and approaches for improving information management and use at the national level. This has the potential to work particularly well in regions where there is already a regional mandate for action.

Capacity development may also be required in ensuring involvement of the full range of stakeholders in information collection, management and use, including indigenous peoples and local communities.

6. Improving access to information on reporting

The workshop recognised that one of the steps which might encourage countries to submit reports to the conventions and agreements would be to make access to reporting formats and guidelines even easier.

The current situation could be improved if each convention website made information relevant to its national reports available from one point on its website (some already do so), and then if a combined biodiversity reporting portal was developed along the lines of the CPF forest reporting portal mentioned earlier, perhaps based on the existing Joint Web Site of the Biodiversity Related Conventions or on the UNEP-WCMC webpages on harmonization, to provide access from one point to all of the different reporting formats and guidelines. This would also be a practical demonstration of harmonization in action.

The website could be developed over time, as harmonization and streamlining advance and changes in reporting processes occur, to:
- show the linkages between different reporting requirements;
- identify common questions and themes and reporting responsibilities;
- include search tools to access information; and
- include best practices on information management and reporting by countries.

At the national level, countries could improve the dissemination of the reports that are written about their biodiversity by, for example, making them all available from a single website. This relates to other ideas expressed during the workshop for developing a national clearing-house for information management and dissemination, and to more general information management issues.

7. Thematic approaches to harmonized reporting

Developing one single report that serves the needs of all conventions and agreements was considered to be very difficult to achieve, but joint thematic reports that addressed the needs of several conventions and agreements were seen by the workshop as an interesting opportunity. Ideally, a national information network or clearing-house could facilitate better compilation of information on a thematic basis and prepare it in a way that allowed for easy access by national focal points, convention secretariats and others, whenever they require it.

Internationally, the approach of the CPF Task Force on Forest-related Reporting provides useful lessons. Specifically, the task force:

- brings together experts on a specific theme from the different conventions and agencies, and promotes joint information requests, common terminologies and sharing of information;
- has established a CPF Portal on Reporting facilitating access to forest-related national reports and questionnaires; and
- enhances collaboration among secretariats and organisations, including work on a joint information framework for forest reporting and on better information management.

A new UNEP project on development of issue-based modules to support coherent implementation of biodiversity-related MEAs has identified inland waters, invasive alien species, climate change and sustainable use as themes that it will address first, and these are all potential areas for joint thematic reporting. Other themes such as protected areas could be used to further develop such an approach. The Biodiversity Liaison Group established following decision VII/26 of the CBD Conference of Parties is a forum that could potentially look into this and agree further collaborative action.

In this context, joint work programmes between conventions and agreements could serve as sources of issues of common interest (although the thematic approach to harmonized reporting should not be restricted to bilateral approaches).

8. Coordination of reporting

A theme often returned to throughout the workshop was one of coordination. It was clear from the pilot project reports that increased coordination at the national level in both convention implementation and reporting was needed, and it was clear that increased collaboration between the convention secretariats on reporting-related issues would also be beneficial.

At the national level it was considered that meetings of focal points of different MEAs in each country needed to occur on a regular basis. It was also considered that increased coordination and harmonization should be addressed in any review of CBD National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans, and other plans and strategies for implementation of conventions and agreements at the national level.

At the international level, the Biodiversity Liaison Group was considered a potential forum for fulfilling this coordinating role, with the support of appropriate international organizations and other experts. Also at the international level, coordination of donor action with respect to information management and reporting to international conventions and agreements may be appropriate.

There is also potential for increasing coordination at the regional level, for example in Europe where work is under way to ensure a coordinated approach to the development and use of 2010 indicators covering both the countries of the European Union and the wider pan-Europe.

9. Recommendations

Based on pilot project reports, on the presentations made at the workshop, and on the subsequent discussion, the workshop developed the following twelve recommendations for action.

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

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

(iii) *Coordination at international levels:* The Biodiversity Liaison Group should consider establishing a technical task force to develop and promote a streamlined reporting agenda across conventions and agreements, taking account of the issues raised in the pilot projects and in this

report, developments requested by governing bodies, and issues discussed during the EMG review mentioned earlier. The task force would comprise technical officers from the secretariats, supported as necessary by other appropriate experts. It is anticipated that the group and task force would work inter-sessionally to develop proposals which would be considered and adopted by governing bodies.

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

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

(vi) *Information management guidelines:* UNEP-WCMC should revisit the previously developed biodiversity data management guidelines, in order to support countries in achieving the previous recommendation. The guidelines should be revised in the light of experience from the pilot projects and other new developments in reporting and harmonization of reporting (including new developments in information and communications technology), reviewed and disseminated widely. UNEP-WCMC should seek to develop a project for potential GEF funding with countries on applying these guidelines to support both implementation and reporting, facilitating development of efficient information networks using a modular approach to information management.

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

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

(ix) *Web portal on reporting:* The convention secretariats and UNEP-WCMC should work together to develop and maintain a single, multilingual website (and perhaps also a CDROM) that links to existing questionnaires, guidelines and other instructions that secretariats have provided for national reporting, as well as results of the work on streamlining and harmonization. This might also incorporate discussion fora and opportunities for sharing of experience. The Joint Web Site of the Biodiversity Related Conventions (currently hosted by CBD) should be investigated as a possible home for this.

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

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

(xii) *Dissemination of workshop results:* UNEP-WCMC and the Chair of the workshop are requested to disseminate the results of the workshop widely, including:

- to the UNEP Executive Director, with a request that the report be circulated to the various UNEP divisions and to their regional offices
- to convention and agreement secretariats, with a request that the respective executive secretaries, secretary generals and directors send the document to their advisory and governing bodies, and to all national focal points
- to the Biodiversity Liaison Group, through formal communication from the workshop Chair
- on websites, including those of conventions and agreements, UNEP-WCMC and joint convention websites
- at appropriate events, including through delivering papers to meetings and conferences of the biodiversity-related conventions and agreements.

10. Participation

The following participated in the workshop, which was chaired by Peter Bridgewater, Secretary General of the Convention on Wetlands.

National ministries and agencies

Koen de Smet, Belgium

Els Martens, Belgium

Marc Peeters, Belgium

Janine van Vessem, Belgium

Ines Verleye, Belgium

Dirk Schwenzfeier, Germany

Patrick Kwabena Ofori-Danson, Ghana

Setyawan Warsono Adi, Indonesia

Tone Solhaug, Norway

Scott A Muller, Panama

Joseph François, Seychelles

Sarah Moon, United Kingdom

James Williams, United Kingdom

Convention and agreement secretariats

Peter Bridgewater, Convention on Wetlands

Marceil Yeater, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

Guy Debonnet, World Heritage Convention

Gerardo Fragoso, Convention on Migratory Species

Douglas Hykle, Convention on Migratory Species & IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU

Bob Kakuyo, Convention on Biological Diversity

Bert Lenten, African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement

International organizations and the European Commission

Stefan Leiner, European Commission

Anne Teller, European Commission

Gordon McInnes, European Environment Agency
Tiina Vähänen, FAO (for Collaborative Partnership on Forests)
Tony Gross, United Nations University
Maria Socorro Z. Manguiat, World Conservation Union

UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre
Jeremy Harrison
Elvina Henriette
Peter Herkenrath