

Synergies between Conventions: An Assessment

The recently concluded World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in agreement with several national governments, international and multilateral organisations, stakeholders and communities declared specific goals with regard to sustainable development. WSSD comes 10 years after the Rio Earth Summit (1992) which pledged political and financial support to enhance the quality of human life through better environment and equity. WSSD also marks the 30th anniversary of the Stockholm Summit on Sustainable Development.

Despite all these commitments many are concerned with the lack of integrated on-the-ground work to deal with better environment. Even though Rio gave birth to three international Conventions, namely the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), the implementation of these Conventions are at varying stages. The Forestry Principles (FP) derived directly from the Rio Summit is often forgotten.

Each of these instruments focus on a particular set of problems, yet each also recognises that activities to address its own issues must also take into account those of the other instruments. Inter-dependency of these instruments are visible, imminent and required. Each of these individually aims to achieve sustainable development. However, one element often forgotten is how at ground level integration is possible and is needed.

The following box describes the objectives of these instruments.

Box 1 : Comparison of MEA Objectives

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

“The objectives of this Convention are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources...” (Article 1, CBD).

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

“The ultimate objective of the Convention and any related legal instruments that the Conference of the Parties may adopt is to achieve... stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time – frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.” (Article 2, UNFCCC)

Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD)

“The objective of this Convention is to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, through effective action at all levels. with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas.

Achieving this objective will involve long-term integrated strategies that focus simultaneously, in affected areas, on improved productivity of land, and the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, in particular at the local level.” (Article 2, UNCCD).

(UNFCCC, 2002)

Incidentally at national level all these three Conventions fall under the purview of agencies looking after environment and natural resources. Yet these are dealt by separate departments and institutions, often with a high degree of disconnect. Such disconnects lead to ineffective implementation, though not individually at Convention level, but collectively to achieve sustainable development.

The barriers to achieve synergies are technical (lack of understanding of cross-sectoral issues, information, impact assessments etc.), political (inter-departmental conflicts, issues of ‘territoriality’, lack of guiding principles and understanding at policy making level) and cultural (thoughts of not overstepping boundaries and lack of insight to working at local or ground levels).

In the face of these challenges there is a need to develop and enhance synergies between the instruments in terms of their implementation at local, national, regional and global levels. In some cases synergies and integrated approaches exist and can be built upon and in some cases efforts are needed to stimulate collaboration, cooperation and harmonization. Box 2 details some such linkages, complementarities and overlapping requirements of these Rio Agreements.

2. Linkages in Processes

As described in Box 1, the principles of three Conventions have elements in common. In addition they also have certain processes that are common or linked. A few of these include the following:

2.1 Scientific Linkage

Scientific assessments are key to informing the negotiation processes. These assessments include an estimate of the socio-economic implication of Climate Change, biodiversity loss, desertification and deforestation. Fundamentally, these assessments are linked when we need to interpret them for environmental protection and sustainable development.

For example, the linkages between Climate Change and forests, land and biodiversity are explicit. Widespread deforestation converts forests into Carbon dioxide and reduces the vegetation cover for storing Carbon dioxide. By removing this cover, deforestation reduces the water retention capacity of the soil and increases soil erosion. This, in turn can lead to changes in temperature and topographic pattern leading to desertification and warming. Thus sustainable management of forests are needed. Deforestation also affects biodiversity in the ecosystem and in turn affects the livelihoods of local communities living in the area.

Thus, actions taken to address one element of the above can have many incremental benefits to the other. Though we understand the scientific linkages well, operational linkages at Convention levels are a bit myopic.

2.2 Implementation linkages

The key environmental agreements also contain many similar requirements for action, research, reporting and other necessary activities agreed by their signatories.

- **Approaches to goals** – The instruments adopt similar approaches to achieve their goals. They recognise needs for national action guided by international experiences. All of them recognise the need for capacity building, awareness raising as a pre-condition to their successes. All of them also identify need for cooperation.
- **Approaches to activities:** All of these instruments promote activities of research, assessments, information exchange, training, development of strategies and action plans and inventories. However, the decisions of design and detail are left open for interpretation by individual governments.
- **Subsidiary Bodies for Scientific and Technological Advice**
All the Conventions require creation of an international body of scientific and technical expertise. CBD works through SBSTTA, UNFCCC through SBSTA and CCD through Committee on Science and Technology. However, the linkages between these bodies are weak and wanting.
- **Information, Monitoring and Reporting**
Biodiversity, Climate Change and Dessertification Convention have independent methods and ways of addressing information needs and information generation. They have independent monitoring and reporting requirements. They all fail both individually and collectively to underline the principles of monitoring as a common denominator in addition to failing to facilitate common reporting from national governments.

**Box 2 : Linkages and Complementarities
Overlapping Requirements of the Parties to the Rio Agreements**

	Climate Change	Biological Diversity	Desertification	Forestry Principles
National Inventories	Article 4 (b)			Principle 12 (a)
National & Regional Action Plans	Article 4 (b)	“Strategies” Article 6(a), (b)	Articles 9, 10	Principles 3 (a), 5(a), 6(b), 8(d & h), 9 (c) Article 4 (b) and IPF Proposals for Action
Identification & Monitoring		Article 8	Article 16	
Develop Protected Areas		Article 8		Principles 7 (b), 8(f)
Legislation	Preamble	Article 8 (k)	Article 5 (e)	Principles 8 (f), 13 (d & 3)
Research	Article 5	Article 12 (b)	Article 17, 19 (b)	Principle 12 (a)
Public Education	Article 6	Article 13	Article 5 (d), 19, 6	Principle 12 (d)
Environmental Assessment	Impact Article 4 (I) (d)	Article 14		Principle 8 (h)
Clearinghouse for technical information		Article 18	Article 18	
Public Participation	Article 6(I) (a) (iii)	Article 9	Article 19 (4)	Principle 2 (d)
Conference of Parties (COP) / regular reviews	Article 7			
Exchange Information	Article 7	Article 17	Article 16	Principles 2 ©, 11, 12 (c)
Training	Article 6	Article 12(a)	Article 19	Principles 3 9a), 11, 12(b)
Reports	Article 12	Article 26		
Data Collection			Article 16	Principle 12 (a)
Examine obligations- Assess implementation	Article 7 (e)	Article 23		Principle 12 (a)
Report Steps to CoP	Article 12	Article 26	Article 26	
Compatible Data/Standards				Article 16 (Source: UNDP, 1997)

3. How to Promote Synergies and Linkages ?

3.1 Some Recommendations

It is truism that we work in a world in which governments work primarily in a sector-based mode to develop and implement their policies and programmes. We need to bring in some changes to this scenario. Suggestion or recommendation for this include the following:

- Enhancing the institutional outlook
- Building capacities – both at personal and institutional levels
- Modifying National Planning processes
- Strengthening information base.

3.1.1 Institutional Outlook

With the overall framework of policymaking, planning and implementation of Rio Conventions and other Sustainable Development related policies, there are several core activities which are particularly amenable to the issue of institutional synergies. These are :

- Awareness raising
- Education
- Reporting
- Data gathering and inventories
- Public participation
- Research and Training

To achieve these synergies it may be useful to consider the following options:

- a) A crosscutting national committee to bring together key players -
This is not new for several countries National Planning Commission is a committee that brings together such players to decide on plans and budgets. Creation of a National Committee on Sustainable Development will be an option.

- b) Separate institutions with a coordinating mechanism -
Several countries work on this principle at least in sectors like finance, banking and health. Similar model for environment may be an option.
- c) A single institution responsible for all instruments
Many countries have Ministries of Environment and Natural Resources which deal with several environment issues, but linkages within them are often weak.

At local level, the options can be:

- a) Creation of a coordinating committee representing all sectors
- b) Making locally elected democratic institutions responsible for environment and development
- c) Using groups and institutions like CBOs, Churches and Women's groups.

3.1.2 Building Capacities

Capacity building and strengthening capacities already existing are urgently needed. Many countries are overtaxed by the Convention's competing demands and obligatory activities besides reporting requirements and monitoring.

Given this, it is important for countries to enhance their capacities. The GEF's Capacity Development Initiative is a welcome option but falls short of addressing or supporting actual activities. Also, the implementation of CDI is a question due to the approval of only phase I of CDI by the GEF council where support is provided for National Capacity Self Assessments (NCSA) without clear emphasis on how countries can implement outcomes of NCSA. This makes CDI's use and effectiveness limited.

Common capacity needs across regions and across conventions

1. Low levels of awareness and knowledge limit the ability for discussion, decision-making and action.
2. Lack of information management, monitoring and observations hampers policy and decision-making.
3. Lack of synchronization of national policy, legal and regulatory frame-works leads to confusion between sectors and between national, regional and local levels.
4. Incentive systems and market instruments are inadequately developed.
5. Institutional mandates either overlap or have gaps, key institutions are not involved, and interactions between institutions are not always effective.
6. Science and technology are ineffectively mobilized in support of policy and decision-making.
7. Preparing for, skill in participating in, and reporting back on, international negotiations and agreements is weak.
8. Coordination, and processes for interaction within the country are poorly developed.
9. Cooperation and networking within regions is often lacking.
10. Individuals tend to be ineffectively deployed, mobilized, motivated or given responsibility.
11. Institutional effectiveness is hampered by weak management and resource constraints.
12. Lack of financial resources and technology.

Source: Country Capacity Development Needs and Priorities: A Synthesis

The general capacity needs to address synergistic activities are the capacities to:

- Inventories, monitoring and systematic observations
- Planning, policy development and reform of legal frameworks
- Impact assessment and research
- Information, knowledge and data management
- Reporting and monitoring
- Education, Training and Public awareness

Capacity building on these can be categorized to human resources, infrastructure development, coordination and cooperation.

3.1.3 Modifying National Planning Processes

Plans to implement the Convention can foster synergies if they meet the following conditions.

- 1) Plans should be consistent with goals of national development
- 2) Plans should identify the roles of the Conventions and other commitments at national, regional and global levels.
- 3) Plans should identify areas where overlaps and conflicts can occur and suggest means of turning them into opportunities of synergies.

Given this there are three possibilities to address national planning processes that can be responsive.

- a) Develop separate plans for each agreement -
Unfortunately this is the one which receives both financial and political support which is neither effective nor suppressive of synergies.
- b) Develop a new Umbrella Plan incorporating elements of all agreements -
This is a good choice provided the institutional mechanism for planning and implementation are in place.
- c) Develop a mechanism to integrate planning associated with the instruments into existing national plans and planning frameworks – This is the best option in current situation but outlook and capacities to do so are weak.

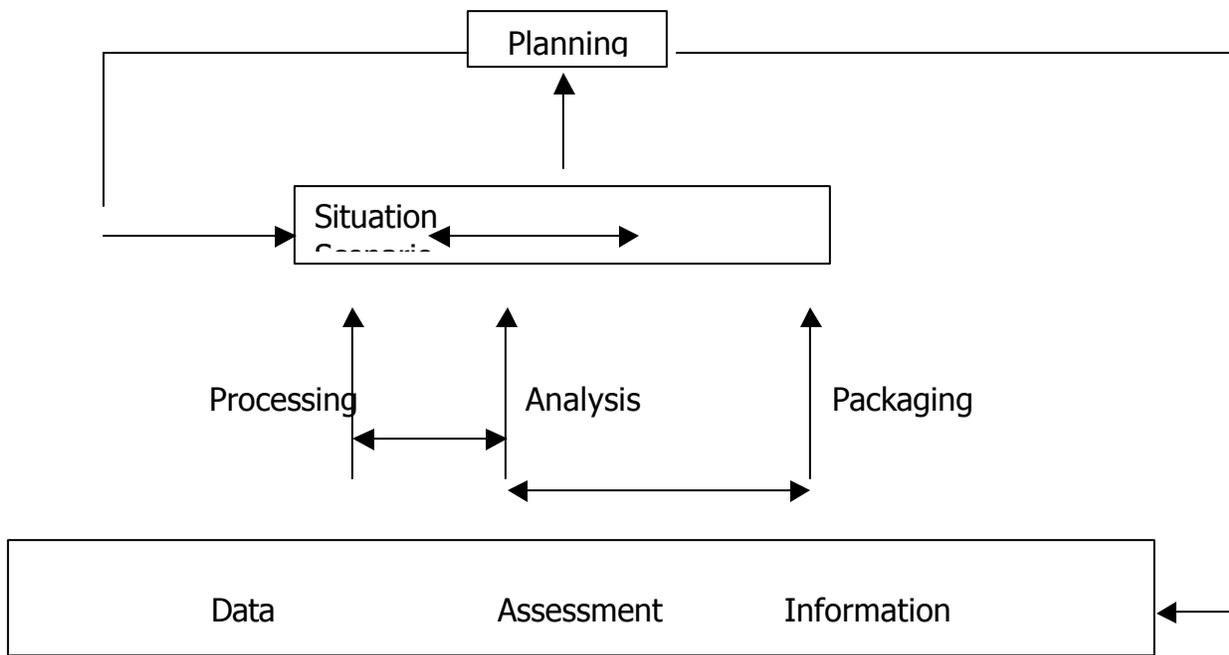
3.1.4 Strengthening Information Base

Strong information systems, efficient networks and intelligent synthesis of these into knowledge equip a country to regularly assess status, progress and plan for sustainable development. Implementation of all the agreements need a good information base. Creation of this base with an implicit design for planning and monitoring is thus needed.

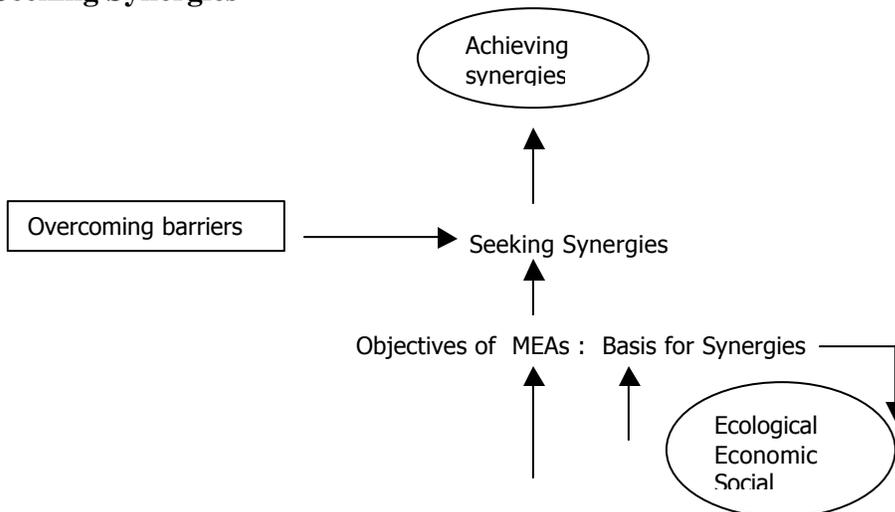
Countries and Convention should also understand that though information is power, on its own it can achieve little. Integrated planning to use the information, data and analysis for reporting and monitoring synergies at action level is the key to success.

The following diagram shows the linkages between information, data, knowledge and planning.

Fig. 1



4. Seeking Synergies



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Benefits of Synergies



Context

Boxes 3 & 4 provide information on how specific activities under the Convention can be contributing to and are influenced by other Convention's principles and plans.

Box 3: Possible adaptation strategies and the benefits they bring to each MEA			
ISSUE	UNCCD	CBD	UNFCCC
Disaster planning framework: early warning systems, emergency measures to respond to floods, droughts, etc.	Help ensure protection of vulnerable communities (e.g., creating food and water reserves, cattle protection schemes).	Identification of fragile ecosystems and species prior to a crisis, to maximize protection during and following a disaster.	Determine priority measures to minimize loss of life and damage to livelihoods as a result of extreme weather events.
Integrated watershed management: agroforestry (firewood, fodder, annual crops), run-off harvesting for trees and range.	No over-exploitation of local water hence low salinization risk; run-off harvesting, terraces and trees conserve soil.	Conserves much of the watershed's biological diversity, utilizes parts of it thus contributing to overall sustainability.	Increases water retention and hence its availability in times of drought. Slows water movement, reducing the risk of flash floods. Maintains vegetation as carbon sink and reservoir.
Intensive greenhouse agriculture and aquaculture (cash crops, fish, industrial materials from algae).	High income per unit soil and water used, thus economizing on land and water resources.	Reduced pressure on land leaves habitats for in-situ biodiversity conservation, thus promoting its utilization.	Reduced pressure on land (a) allows conservation of biodiversity resistant to climate change; (b) maintains carbon sink and reservoir.
In-situ conservation of biological resources, wildlife conservation.	Potential for economic exploitation as an alternative livelihood; promotion of ecotourism.	Global benefits from dryland biodiversity assets.	Conservation of genetic diversity instrumental in restoring climate change damaged ecosystems.
<i>Adapted from: "Review of Activities for the Promotion and Strengthening of Relationships with other Relevant Conventions and Relevant International Organizations, institutions and Agencies." ICCD/COP3/9. 1999</i>			

Box 4: International Initiatives Seeking Synergies between MEAs.

In recent years, the Secretaries of the UNFCCC, CBD and UNCCD have made several recommendations, conclusions and decisions to increase mutual understanding and coordination. In March 2001, the CBD's Scientific Body requested that its Executive Secretary explore the formation of a joint Liaison Group (JLG) responsible for enhancing coordination between the CBD and the UNFCCC. The establishment of a JLG was endorsed by the Parties to the UNFCCC in July 2001, and agreed to by the UNCCD in August 2001. The JLG held its first meeting in December 2001, with subsequent meetings taking place in January and April 2002. The JLG has established a common web-based calendar of events related to the three conventions, and is exploring the possibility of holding a joint workshop on cross-cutting thematic areas and activities.

In addition, the CBD has established the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group (AHTEG) to prepare scientific advice on the interlinkages between biological diversity and climate change. The first meeting of the AHTEG took place in January 2002; a follow-up meeting is planned for October 2002. The CBD is also developing a joint work programme with the UNCCD to examine options for conservation and sustainable use of dry and sub-humid lands.

UNCCD's Secretariat examined how it may promote and strengthen its relationship with related conventions, international organizations and other institutions at its fifth Conference of the Parties held in October 2001. Prior to this, the Secretariat of the UNCCD participated in the April 2001 workshop in which draft guidelines for the preparation of NAPAs were developed.

Exploration of synergies is also taking place through a number of other initiatives at the international level. These include: an IPCC technical paper on the interlinkages between climate change, biodiversity and desertification ; OECD DAC study on synergies in the national implementation of the RIO Agreements; UNEP's work on synergies amongst conventions; and the United Nations University's inter-linkages initiative.

(Source UNFCCC, 2002)

5. Conclusions

Agencies like Secretaries to Conventions, UNDP, UNEP and others have started thinking about bringing synergies to action. Specific and joint work programmes should be

developed as a part of JLP and AHTEG. A specific inter-agency working group with a mandate to address synergies in Action must be established and linkages to on-going ground work be developed. Encouraging Parties to submit innovative project ideas under the GEF's operational programme 12 dealing with ecosystem approach should be explored. Countries should be encouraged to specifically design programmes on synergies as a part of their national strategy and action plan.

At National level, the agencies coordinating implementation of the Convention must establish a joint working group involving stakeholders and focal points of the Convention to discuss options and actions. The Capacity Development Initiative must address the issue of synergies specifically and all NCSA activities must focus on this at national level. Agencies mandated to implement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and WSSD outcomes (WEHAB) must design processes on synergies soon, so that action of implementation can be inclusive.

At the local level, synergies mean livelihoods translating the experiences, scaling-up activities and influencing larger policy through action form the priorities. Initiatives like the Equator Initiative. Small Grants Programme of GEF have unique opportunities to identify such action and support replication and if need be improvement.

6. References

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