

## **Managing synergistic interplay: Experiences in the cluster of biodiversity-related conventions**

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Regime complexes or loosely coupled systems of institutions have emerged in many areas of international co-operation where patterns of interests diverge. Scholars have observed that regime complexity introduces inconsistencies that are solved in the process of implementation; creates incentives for cross-institutional political strategies; forces bounded rationality or decision-making in conditions of relative uncertainty; generates small group environments; and produces a variety of feedback effects, including competition and reverberation. Managing regime complexity is necessary for coherent and effective global governance. The management of regime interplay and its effects has been described as interplay management and has been distinguished from broader notions of institutional reform based on institutional and/or organisational integration. Regime complexity studies have examined situations where conflict is managed to ensure internal consistency, but have paid less attention to cases where synergistic interplay is managed to achieve internal coherence. Examining how regime interplay is managed in these settings is important because potential for synergy is often left unexploited. This paper analyses the management of synergistic interplay in the cluster of biodiversity-related conventions, which comprises one framework convention and five specialist regimes focussed on wetlands, natural heritage, wildlife trade, migratory species and plant genetic resources. The biodiversity cluster provides an ideal empirical setting because it is characterised by high levels of inter-treaty co-operation and unfulfilled synergy opportunities. The paper identifies and discusses the factors that explain the extent and depth of co-operation in the cluster. The analysis is based on a series of interviews with treaty secretariat officials and representatives of international organisations conducted between September 2011 and January 2012. Research materials were examined using thematic analysis approaches. The broad picture reveals six major challenges affecting co-operation in the biodiversity cluster: 1) conditions of co-operative fragmentation or partial embedment under a core institution; 2) autonomous institutional arrangements; 3) bureaucratisation of inter-treaty co-operation; 4) strategies of mutual adjustment where costs are unequally distributed; 5) frames of reference not fully appropriated; and 6) limited executive capacities amid ever-increasing tasks. Clustering has long been raised as an option for improving synergy in the cluster and the idea has recently resurfaced in the light of experiences in the chemicals and hazardous waste sector, where administrative functions have been streamlined and decision-making procedures become more closely related. Findings of this study suggest, however, that a hypothetical integration of institutional and/or organisational arrangements would be less viable and cost-effective than more targeted efforts to improve internal management. This paper contributes to the literature on regime interplay by advancing understanding of the factors that prevent the full exploitation of synergy in settings where synergistic interplay is dominant. Results of this research are immediately relevant to debates on the reform of the system of international environmental

governance, delivering insights into the value of interplay management vis-à-vis mainstream proposals promoting changes in institutional form.