

# Knowledge Needs for Better Multilateral Environmental Agreements: Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Adil Najam<sup>1</sup>

**T**he last couple of decades have seen hectic negotiations pertaining to multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). While many people have celebrated the resulting sense of activity, others have lamented the lukewarm commitments enshrined in many MEAs and the lack of implementation; this has led to a sense of 'MEA proliferation' leading to 'negotiation fatigue'.

Indeed, many have voiced strong frustration with the lack of tangible outputs and meaningful connections between MEA activity and the rest of the world. MEAs have been characterised as distant from local realities, too self-referential, having few direct links to actual events and current initiatives. There is a growing feeling that the world of MEAs is so detached that it cannot be an engine or initiator of real change for sustainable development. On the other hand, MEAs have been amongst the most visible manifestation of the intergovernmental community's interest in sustainable development – so much so that nearly all MEAs now advertise the achievement of sustainable development as their ultimate objective. Indeed, even the World

Trade Organisation (WTO) has recently begun claiming sustainable development as one of its defining goals. There remains, however, a disconnect between the proclaimed interest of MEAs in achieving sustainable development and their ability to do so on the ground.

How can this disconnect be addressed? This paper seeks to begin answering this question by reviewing ways in which better research partnerships could strengthen existing and emerging MEA regimes in the service of sustainable development.

The recent interest in improving the coherence between MEAs, as a way of devising more efficient and streamlined structures for global environmental governance, is a welcome development. However, the discussion is sometimes defined too narrowly. There is a need for 'coherent MEAs' as much as there is for 'MEA coherence'. Moreover, coherence has to be substantive as well as procedural. While pooled secretariats and joint negotiations for related MEAs are certainly a good initial steps, the ultimate goal must be firmly rooted in the content of MEAs, rather than just their procedures.

## KEY CHALLENGES:

**The challenge to the research community is how their research can:**

- improve the coherence of individual MEAs with their own sustainable development goals
- improve the substantive coherence between different MEAs (and other relevant regimes) so that they relate better to the broader goal of sustainable development
- improve the procedural coherence between the structures of MEA management so as to reduce the pressures of an inefficient negotiating environment; which is, in itself, an important impediment to the pursuit of sustainable development

**Better MEAs are likely to emerge if:**

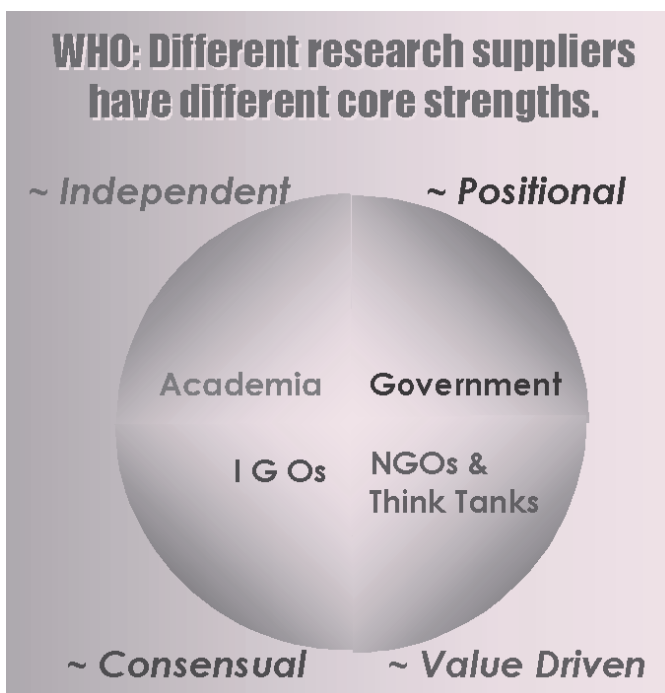
- all research suppliers provide good research in their areas of comparative core strengths
- robust research is provided in all substantive categories
- appropriate research inputs are made at each of the broad stages of the MEA lifecycle

<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented in this paper have benefited greatly from written contributions from Saleemul Huq, Fannie Mutepefa, Enoch Okpara, Krystyna Swiderska, Camilla Toulmin and Konrad von Moltke; discussion with Taghi Farvar, Atiq Rahman and George Varughese; and comments from the participants of a Workshop on Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development held at Cambridge (UK) on July 18–19, 2002. Their contribution is gratefully acknowledged; all responsibility for the content and its shortcomings remains with the author.

## Towards a framework: who does what, when?

Let us begin by laying out a framework for understanding the role of research in the MEA lifecycle. If all policy is really about putting theory into practice, then research has to be the lifeblood of good public policy. Research is particularly important to international policy on issues of high indeterminacy such as environment and sustainable development. The term 'research' could conceivably include so much as to become meaningless. It is important, therefore, to organise our understanding of research into meaningful categories. There are multiple ways to think about research in terms of MEAs, each useful in different contexts and each highlighting different aspects of the research needs.

Three ways of understanding and categorising the role of research in MEAs are of particular importance. The first looks at the suppliers of research to the MEA process and responds to the question, "who is doing the research?" The second looks at the substance of research on MEAs and responds to the question, "what type of research is it?" The third focuses on the stage in the MEA cycle in which the research is being done and responds to the question, "when is the research being done?"



### 1. Who? Categorising by research supplier

There are multiple actors that provide research related to MEAs – formal and informal, solicited and unsolicited, public and private. Each research supplier has particular core strengths and tends to produce research with particular qualities. Although research suppliers often cross neat categories, and their core strengths can sometimes be debatable, the public perception of these core qualities is nonetheless important. The key research suppliers in the MEA lifecycle can be divided into four broad categories:

- **Research by academia.** The actor most closely associated with 'research', of course, is academia. Even though academia may no longer be the biggest provider of research on MEAs, it is very often the first port of call for those seeking such research. This is not only because research is a 'primary function' for academics but also because academics stake a claim to being a source of *independent* and peer-reviewed analysis, a claim that may not always be entirely true, but which cannot readily be denied because it is more true for academia than for other research suppliers.
- **Research by governments.** Governments are a less noticeable but significant source of research on MEAs. The core strength of research by governments is that it is explicitly or implicitly *positional*. Not only does it provide information about particular countries, but in doing so it provides insights about the positions that those countries are likely to take on particular issues.
- **Research by intergovernmental agencies.** Intergovernmental agencies – including MEA secretariats – have become major suppliers of research. They produce mountains of in-house and contracted research that ranges from papers prepared by internally, to out-sourced research, to dedicated research enterprises such as the assessments and special reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). A core quality of such research is that it tends to reflect *consensual* positions since these agencies are owned by all governments.
- **Research by NGOs, think tanks, business groups, etc.** Non-governmental, non-academic sources are now among the largest suppliers of research related to MEAs. Some of it is, in fact, very 'academic' and is done by academics themselves. Such research is often sponsored by or done directly for governments or intergovernmental agencies. However, the defining feature of such research is that it is explicitly *value driven*. This is not to say that other research suppliers do not have values, nor that such research is any less robust. However, unlike research from other suppliers, it tends to be based on the explicit sets of values that drive their sponsoring institutions.

### 2. What? Categorising by research content

A categorisation by substantive research content would differentiate between the type of research questions being asked concerning an MEA. There are at least four distinct types of research, each with particular characteristics, and requiring particular capacities. While there are overlaps between these various types of research, they are generally distinct and distinctively recognisable. More importantly, however, they build on each other: formally, by processes of cross-referencing during analysis; and informally by each setting agendas for the other.

- **Research on the physical environment** provides the scientific and factual basis for MEAs and includes research on changes in physical conditions and determinants of physical conditions. All MEAs need scientific research because that is the only way we know

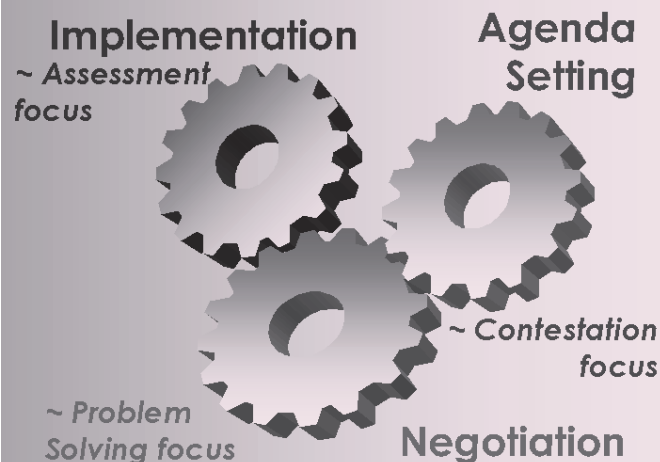
## WHAT: Different Types of Research are Required.



what is going on in the environment. Indeed, it is very often such research that places an issue on the international agenda, as happened quite dramatically in the case of stratospheric ozone depletion and climate change. For the most part, such research builds on disciplines of the *natural sciences*. Academic scholars usually play the leading role in conducting such research and, even when it is done by scholars residing in other sectors, it is often presented and tested academically.

- **Research on policy impacts** seeks to understand the physical and human impacts of policy. It is particularly important to MEAs and has recently drawn much attention under the heading of ‘effectiveness’ assessment. It includes research on the impacts of MEAs on social, economic, human and environmental conditions and builds heavily, but not entirely, on the *social sciences*. All four of the research suppliers identified above produce such research but from rather different motivations, and often with different results.
- **Research on policy options** has been characterised as ‘part research, part policy’ and seeks to identify and advocate particular policy options in terms of specific national or stakeholder interests. Innovation and evolution in MEA agendas often flow from such research. Good research in this category invariably builds on good research in other categories: the best tends to be transparent and explicit about its *prescriptive* or even partisan focus, and the worst tries to masquerade as belonging to one of the other categories. While such research also comes from all four of the identified research suppliers, governments and NGOs are usually the most heavily engaged in such research.
- **Research on MEAs** includes research to understand why and how particular MEAs function, how they have developed or are likely to evolve, and how they might be improved. Such research tends to be *descriptive* in nature. It is often a lead-in to analyses of MEA impacts when it comes from academics and is a precursor to policy options when it comes from NGOs. It is also

## WHEN: Different Phases are motivated by different types of research focus.

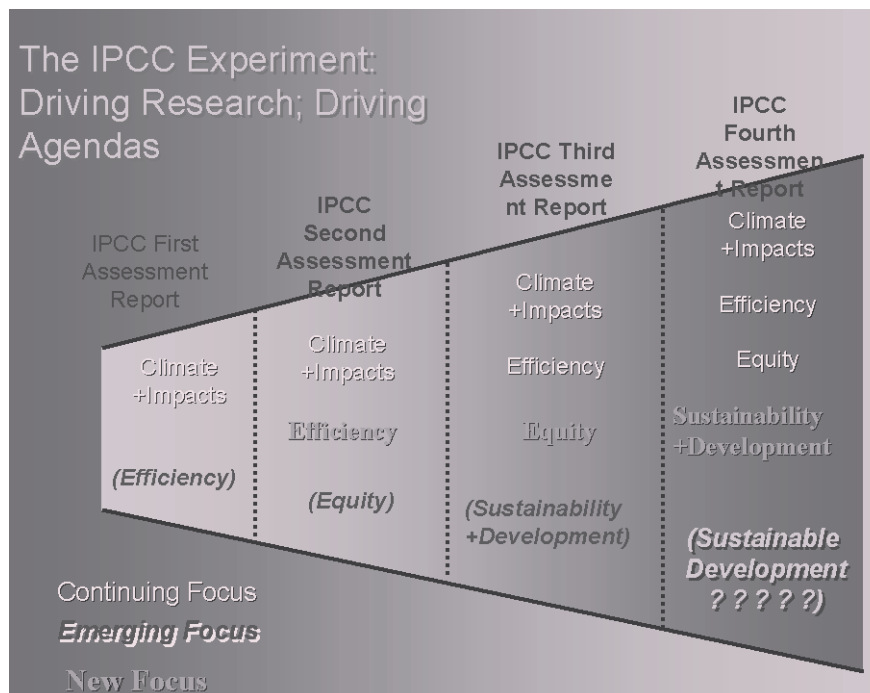


sometimes produced for purely pedagogical reasons to train participants in the MEA process, including NGO and government representatives. Such research is of particular value in terms of capacity building and can, therefore, have a direct bearing on MEA quality.

### 3. When? Categorising by phase of MEA lifecycle

There is significant research on exactly what constitutes the ‘MEA lifecycle’ and various models have been posited of its various phases. Without going into the intricacies of this literature, we can identify three broad phases that are common in various models. While what is sometimes called the ‘MEA lifecycle’ is generally represented as an ordered and staged cyclical process, the fact is that usually all three phases operate simultaneously and movement on any phase will spur and change the dynamics in the others:

- **Research during the agenda setting phase** is characterised by *contestation*. It is generally a process where multiple ideas are floated and compete for attention. A few become the basis of further action, often with a call for more research or the initiation of policy negotiations. The process does not necessarily reach consensus, but it does narrow the field of issues and options to be seriously considered. Contestation often happens at two distinct levels. The first, led by academics, is based mostly on research about the physical environments and potential policy impacts. The second, usually led by NGOs, derives most nourishment from research about policy impacts and policy options. When governments and intergovernmental research join the chorus this usually implies that the issue is to be moved to the next stage. The contestation continues and usually adds new issues to the agenda as the process develops. A good example of this process was the early climate conferences which led to the near permanent IPCC research structure. Over the years the IPCC deliberations have very clearly advanced the climate agenda as well as responded to its evolution due to other influences (see figure, based on *IPCC Third Assessment Report*).



- **Research during the negotiation phase.** MEA research in the negotiation phase is quite frantic. While some elements of contestation remain, the purpose of contestation changes and is generally overwhelmed by a *problem-solving* focus. As is demonstrated in the climate change case, agenda setting – or, to be more exact, agenda refinement – continues with negotiation. Research conducted by or for governments becomes particularly important as understanding of different positions and policy options takes centre stage. While research findings from academic institutions and intergovernmental organisations also play critical roles in this process, NGOs are fairly active suppliers of research in this phase. Just as governments push policy options based on their national interests, NGOs and others push options based on their defining values.
- **Research during the implementation phase.** Research on implementation lies at the conjunction of descriptive research on MEAs and research on physical and policy impacts. Most MEAs have only just begun to flirt with implementation. While some, like the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) or the Convention on Ozone-Depleting Substances, are in implementation phase, most (including, for example, the climate regime) are not, while some, like the Desertification Convention, are in the very early phases of implementation. The focus of the research related principally to implementation tends to be on *assessment* of progress, impact and effectiveness. This, of course, leads back to new research for agenda setting and negotiation based on these assessments. Intergovernmental organisations are (generally) major movers of such research, especially through the various assessments they require or contract. The other three players are also likely to be involved in such research, sometimes at the behest of intergovernmental agencies and often on their own.

A useful framework for identifying research needs can be constructed by using these three sets of categories and asking the question: **Who is best placed to do what type of research, when in the MEA lifecycle?** The important point to be made is not that one particular supplier or type of research is more important than the other; it is that better MEAs are likely to emerge if all research suppliers provide good research in their areas of comparative core strengths, if robust research is provided in all substantive categories, and if appropriate research inputs are made at each of the broad stages of the MEA lifecycle. If research partnerships for sustainable development are to influence MEA coherence, then the partnerships must themselves be the product of a coherent strategy that builds on the strengths and synergies discussed above.

## Towards coherence

Applying this framework to the issue of enhancing MEA coherence in all its three dimensions, defined earlier, we begin to get a sense of where research partnerships are most needed and can add most value to the larger goal of sustainable development. An important distinction here is between better research for MEAs (which is usually demanded by the MEAs themselves) and research for better MEAs (which usually is not). While it is common to place more emphasis on the first, both are useful and the latter may ultimately be more important.

### 1. Improve the coherence of individual MEAs with their own sustainable development goals

Every MEA – and even the WTO – is now nominally committed to the goal of sustainable development. International institutions including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and most regional development banks have also internalised the language of sustainable development. While some MEAs (e.g., the Desertification Convention) and some institutions

(e.g., UNDP) seem to have taken the concept more seriously than others, the original potency of the concept has largely been relegated to the realm of the rhetorical. Indeed, it has been argued that this wide-scale declaratory acceptance of 'sustainable development' has 'defanged' the concept of its operational intent in terms of actual policy action. Yet, the impressive declaratory inroads made for 'sustainable development' over the last decade provide the research community with both a responsibility and an opportunity. The responsibility flows from the fact that one of the reasons why MEAs have been able to ignore operationalising their sustainable development mandates is that there is a severe paucity of research on exactly how particular MEAs impact or can impact sustainable development goals.

One example of the opportunities for research partnerships in this area relates to the Climate Convention. The links between sustainable development and climate change have been boldly proclaimed in the Convention and have been hotly debated in the IPCC. However, they remain peripheral to the regime's actual design. A key research challenge is to begin calculating the human, economic and environmental costs of adaptation as well as mitigation to the poorest communities and, equally importantly, to individual livelihoods. Such research is particularly important because the communities that are most vulnerable to climate change (e.g., coastal communities in developing countries and small island states) also have comparatively tattered safety nets and low resilience to severe climate change. In this case, as in just about all others, the major gaps in our understanding lie not so much at the international level, as at national and local levels. The particular research gap in this case relates to research on policy impacts and policy options. In both cases, NGOs – and particularly those located within the South and with links to the vulnerable communities – are best placed to fill this research gap, possibly with support from governments and intergovernmental agencies.

## **2. Improve the substantive coherence between different MEAs**

In this case we are interested in research that can enhance the substantive coherence between various MEAs so that they can better serve the interests of sustainable development. This is important because MEAs have been compartmentalised by issues, whereas a defining feature of sustainable development is that 'everything is linked to everything' and many of the most important challenges as well as opportunities lie at the conjunction of different issues.

There are two particular research challenges in this area. The first is to identify the areas of substantive overlap that already exist and to initiate efforts of MEA clustering, pooled secretariats, and joint negotiations in these areas. Early research in this area has already identified a number of 'natural clusters'. For example, issues related to the atmosphere are clearly a cluster that could be built by first pooling the ozone and climate conventions and then linking these to other related issues where the science as well as policy will be advanced through natural synergies. Such clustering would also serve the extremely important purpose of easing the negotiation preparation pressure from

developing countries which are being increasingly burdened by more frequent and more technically intense negotiations, for which they have neither sufficient resources nor sufficient capacities. Immediate research in this area will partly come from better understanding of the MEAs themselves, is likely to be built upon descriptive research, and should be spearheaded by intergovernmental agencies, particularly UNEP.

The second area is to identify new contexts for potential linkage and eventual coherence. The immediate concern here is to link the evolving environmental provisions in the World Trade Organisation to the existing provisions in MEAs. Some possible areas for positive coherence have been identified in the literature:

- a) coherence between intellectual property rights regimes established by TRIPs and in key MEAs such as the Convention on Biodiversity;
- b) coherence between the polluter pays principle within MEAs and anti-dumping provisions within the WTO; and
- c) coherence between the 'special and differential' treatment clauses in the WTO and the 'common but differentiated responsibility' clauses within MEAs.

Research on such areas has begun to be pursued by intergovernmental organisations, especially the WTO. However, governments – particularly developing country governments – have a strong interest in pursuing opportunities for such coherence for sustainable development. In this regard, partnerships with academic scholars and NGO practitioners are likely to be useful since scholars who have an interest and expertise in *both* MEAs and WTO are more likely to be found in academia and NGOs than in governmental or intergovernmental organisations.

## **3. Improve the procedural coherence between the structures of MEA management**

Procedural coherence is important because it can lead to improved governance. Moreover, it is likely to reduce the pressures of an inefficient negotiating environment. As the number of institutions with a direct mandate for, or indirect influence on, global environmental issues has increased, it has become increasingly difficult for governments as well as civil society to keep track of the various, and sometimes contradictory, messages coming from these institutions. With MEA proliferation, a number of new environmental treaty secretariats have added to this cacophony. The result is not only a severe case of negotiation fatigue but also an overdose of research and reporting responsibilities being thrust on countries – particularly developing countries – in the name of better global environmental governance.

While some have been suggesting a 'superinstitution' for the environment, the problems inherent in the idea seem to outweigh its benefits. However, there are a variety of other, less drastic, mechanisms for improving the procedural coherence in global environmental governance. Some that have been discussed in the literature include: a) multi-issue panels for scientific assessment, b) a single location for all environmental secretariats, c) improved co-ordination

between international environmental institutions, d) back-to-back negotiating sessions for related MEAs, e) pooled reporting requirements across various MEAs. Improving procedural coherence will require research inputs both in terms of better descriptive research on MEAs themselves, and in devising realistic and realisable policy options for operationalising such coherence. Research partnerships between intergovernmental organisations and NGOs which specialise across a range of different MEAs could yield particularly useful dividends. A key element in this process is the role of capacity building. It is quite clear that many developing country governments lack critical capacities for the type of research they need effectively to negotiate better MEAs; the first step in building such research capacity must be a comprehensive capacity audit to determine exactly which research capacities are needed where. ●



## About the Poverty and Environment Initiative

*The Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI) aims to help countries strengthen their own capacities to fight poverty through sound and equitable environmental management. By building partnerships and supporting learning and knowledge-sharing at local, national and global levels, PEI focuses on promoting more effective ways to integrate the environmental priorities of the poor into national strategies and policy processes for poverty eradication and sustainable development. In collaboration with country-level and international partners, PEI support focuses on three broad areas:*

- (1) *participatory research and analysis of poverty-environment linkages and their cross-sectoral relationships;*
- (2) *multi-stakeholder processes for policy dialogue and design; and*
- (3) *indicators and monitoring of poverty-environment trends and policy outcomes.*

*PEI is co-ordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Directorate General for Development of the European Commission.*

**The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)** is an independent, non-profit research institute working in the field of sustainable development. The **Regional and International Networking Group (Ring)** is a global alliance of research and policy organisations that seeks to enhance and promote sustainable development through a programme of collaborative research, dissemination and policy advocacy. There are currently 14 Ring member organisations based in 5 continents.

**Contact:** Viv Davies, Ring Coordinator, IIED  
3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7388 2117 Fax: +44 (0)20 7304 4336  
Websites: [www.iied.org](http://www.iied.org) • [www.ring-alliance.org](http://www.ring-alliance.org)  
Email: [wssd@iied.org](mailto:wssd@iied.org) or [ring@iied.org](mailto:ring@iied.org)