
The Committee of Permanent Representatives
Briefing by the Secretariat
19 April 2018
2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Conference Room 4

InforMEA: The UN Information Portal on Multilateral Environmental Agreements

Effectively addressing global environmental challenges depends on a well-functioning and coherent governance framework, and a collective understanding of each actor's role and mandate. While, for example, international trade, agriculture and labour law regimes are administered by specialised organizations, the field of environment is characterized by high institutional fragmentation with different governance systems. This presents a challenge to the coherent evolution of principles, norms and targets which are key to promoting the implementation of International Environmental Law. To support greater implementation and enforcement of internationally agreed legislation, goals and targets, access to information from the key actors is crucial.

Noting that Multilateral Environmental Agreements play a key role in international environmental governance, the InforMEA initiative was created to promote greater harmonization of information across relevant institutions through 'interoperability' i.e. enabling information systems to share, exchange and make use of environmental data, for the benefit of parties and the environmental community at large. This Initiative comprises of 20 Multilateral Environmental Agreements hosted by 5 UN agencies¹, including the three Rio conventions², biodiversity-related conventions, chemicals and waste conventions, conventions related to marine environment and a number of regional conventions, which jointly work towards sharing information through open access solutions and common standards. The Initiative is co-chaired by UN Environment Programme and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, with financial support from the European Union.

By the end 2017, the Initiative's flagship product, [InforMEA portal](#)³, had 160,000 unique visitors and an additional 30,000 unique visitors to [InforMEA's E-learning Portal](#). Usage from the developing world, for example, has tripled over the past 12 months alone. The portal provides access to:

1. A Keyword search facility⁴ that encompasses:
 - 70 Treaties Texts analyzed against key concepts of international environmental law;
 - 11,000 governing body decisions;
 - 5,000 national reports and 600 national plans;
 - Internationally agreed goals including the Sustainable Development Goals, the Aichi Targets and other relevant goals;
 - 140,000 copies of national legislation (Source: The Food and Agriculture Organization);

¹ United Nations; UN Environment Programme; the Food and Agriculture Organization; United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization; and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

² The Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

³ www.informea.org

⁴ Example: https://www.informea.org/en/search?search_api_views_fulltext=plastic

- 4,000 cases and judicial decisions pertaining to the environment;
 - Literature and publications (Source: The International Union for Conservation of Nature).
2. A [Learning section](#) with over 27 free online courses catering for 13,000 registered learners;
 3. [Party Profiles](#) including ratification information, national focal points and experts;
 4. [Treaty Profiles](#) including ratification and implementation status;
 5. A [Glossary](#) with definitions and relationships of key concepts of Environmental Law;
 6. A [Goals section](#) showing the collective contribution by Multilateral Environmental Agreements to internationally agreed goals.

Below is an overview of the key aspects of the InforMEA initiative's work.

I. The core of InforMEA – Knowledge Management / Interoperability

The underlying basis of InforMEA is “semantic interoperability” i.e. ensuring that any information shared is accurately interpreted as was intended at the source and is meaningful to the end-user. This requires that both the sender and receiver of this information use common data formats and standards to support data exchange and avoid ambiguity. The InforMEA Initiative jointly develops these standards, formats and information exchange solutions for the various categories of Information, such as decisions of supreme governing bodies, treaty texts, contacts, meetings and national plans and reports. Over the past eight years, these specifications⁵ have been implemented by each MEA, for the different data categories, and the status of the level of implementation is available on the InforMEA Portal⁶. It is also in the context of this core aspect of the Initiative's work that it collaborates with the UN Working Group on Document Standards which was initiated by the Chief Executive Board's High-Level Committee on Management to define a common document standard for the UN system.

II. Enhancing the retrievability of Information – the InforMEA Ontology and semi-automated indexing

A collection of environmental terms in the legal parlance, known as the Law and Environment Ontology is also available through the glossary tab of the InforMEA Portal. It not only provides a common interpretation of these terms but also enhances the retrievability of information related to them. This is achieved by aligning/mapping these terms against those used by Multilateral Environmental Agreements to capitalize on their individual indexing efforts and thus improve the ease with which information can be found and retrieved. During its current and second phase, the InforMEA project (through 2018) seeks to ensure the broad application of Law and Environment Ontology by Multilateral Environmental Agreements. To achieve this, a collaboration between the InforMEA project and the experts from the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership who are behind the development of Climate Tagger⁷, seeks to test and possibly customize auto-tagging software solutions for Multilateral Environmental Agreements.

III. InforMEA Learning

The objective of the [InforMEA E-Learning Portal Tool](#) is to promote knowledge and greater understanding of International Environmental Law. It currently offers 28 courses, and caters for over 13,000 registered learners from over 190 countries of which about 5000 have received certificates of completion. The courses are modular and self-paced, allowing learners to define learning paths and rhythm according to their needs, accessible at no cost at any time and in different languages. The Initiative intends to expand the e-learning platform to support virtual classrooms and blended learning activities in the context of

⁵ <http://www.informea.org/about/api-specifications/>

⁶ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ewoxCTJIWnMZQKYC17u-VU94J9XexGF_2RyamuvVgVM/edit

⁷ REEEP Climate-tagger: <https://www.reeep.org/climate-tagger>

capacity building on implementation and compliance of Multilateral Environmental Agreements. A few universities, including those from East Africa, Australia, and South Pacific, have incorporated these courses in their curricular on Environmental Law.

IV. Collective Intelligence from national reports

As Parties submit information to Multilateral Environmental Agreements on national implementation in line with their reporting requirements and obligations, such information is shifting from hard-copy documents to on-line soft-copy tools. Further, recent technological advances allow for interoperability between these tools, regardless of their location or ownership, thus allowing for Multilateral Environmental Agreements, within and across thematic clusters, to be searched against several “filters” such as topics, goals and targets, nomenclatures (related to categories of chemicals or of species of flora and fauna), and geographical references. A concrete application of this data-supported policy-making and progress-tracking work is the “Data Reporting Tool for MEAs – DART”⁸, which intends to create collective national workspaces that will help in organizing, sharing, maintaining documentation in the context of national reports related to biodiversity. The use of the same workspace by several reporters is expected to foster communication and cooperation at the national level, and to facilitate re-use of information in the spirit of “enter once, re-use several times”. Integrating national biodiversity information in one place may also be of value in the context of analysing relevant information against Sustainable Development Goals, and ultimately demonstrating the contribution of Multilateral Environmental Agreements towards achieving Agenda 2030.

V. Expanding InforMEA – case law and compliance decisions and trade related information

With a focus on implementation and compliance of Multilateral Environmental Agreements, the Initiative will collect and exchange legislation related to the implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements, and seeks collaboration in the collection of judicial decisions and compliance committee decisions through, for example, the recently established Global Judicial Institute on the Environment. The latter aspect is not only strongly supported by the participating the Convention on Access to Information under the UN Economic Commission for Europe, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), it also relates to UN Environment Assembly resolution 1/13 which emphasizes the importance of access to information and collection of information and responds to the fact that environmental cases are frequently consulted by users of InforMEA. Such an effort may further help demonstrate the environmental aspect to Sustainable Development Goal 16.3 (promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all) and its soon to be a defined indicator 16.3.2 on “access to civil justice”. Another emerging focus of the Initiative is related to trade and environment and efforts to collect information from sustainable trade chapters and exemptions in regional and bilateral trade agreements that pertain to Multilateral Environmental Agreements and the environment. Relevant components of such work are current under consideration.

⁸ Generously supported by the Federal Government of Switzerland and the European Union and in partnership with the Biodiversity Synergies Project of the Law Division.