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# Managers of complex change? How United Nations treaty secretariats jointly govern institutional interplay in global environmental governance

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## Abstract

Research on international bureaucracies, such as treaty secretariats, has predominantly focused on broadening our understanding of their role, function, and influence within their respective regulatory domains. However, the potential for treaty secretariats to manage situations of institutional overlap by coordinating with other agencies across policy areas has remained understudied. This article offers new empirical and theoretical insights for studying collective agency and coordination mechanisms in instances of institutional interaction within hybrid regime complexes. Specifically, it investigates how the treaty secretariats of the Rio Conventions under the United Nations employ joint interplay management as a means to improve institutional coherence within the climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification nexus. Collectively, the public agencies aim to advance knowledge and discourse, influence norm-building processes and regulation, or build capacity and support the joint implementation of policy objectives addressing the interlinked environmental problems. They do this by interacting with various actors across governance levels, including national governments, transnational initiatives, private actors, or civil society. By tracing the process linking joint activities with effects of such interactions, this qualitative case study makes a conceptual contribution by extrapolating a mechanistic theory for joint interplay management. The article demonstrates that treaty secretariats have to contend with challenges of resource allocation, diverging mandates, leadership priorities, and the degree of politicization and timing which frequently intervene stages of strategizing and executing joint activities. The results highlight that joint interplay management can be most impactful when secretariats employ orchestration practices through joint outreach and advocacy to advance coherent institutional responses to interdependent environmental problems.

## KEYWORDS

coherence, global environmental governance, institutional interplay, institutional overlap, joint interplay management, treaty secretariats

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

For United Nations (UN) environmental institutions, delivering on their overarching governance targets has become increasingly challenging. They have been designed to regulate specific transboundary environmental problems despite apparent areas of ecological and political overlap which bear potential for synergy and conflict with other UN environmental institutions. Scholars and policy makers have therefore increasingly debated reforming UN environmental institutions to break up silo thinking and more effectively address issue linkages (Hale et al., 2013; Mingst et al., 2022). Today, the architectures of most policy domains in global environmental governance are densely populated by an ever-increasing number of diverse institutions and actors. These architectures feature highly fragmented ‘hybrid’ regime complexes which consist of formal interstate institutions next to transnational networks, non-governmental organizations, public-private partnerships spanning across intergovernmental and transnational levels (Abbott & Faude, 2021). This hybrid setting rejuvenates an older debate about the potentially positive or negative effects of such fragmented governance architectures, which renders institutional coordination and problem solving less straightforward for all actors (Oberthür & Pożarowska, 2013; van Asselt, 2014; Zelli & Van Asselt, 2013).

At their core, UN environmental institutions function through intergovernmental bureaucracies, or treaty secretariats. Over the past decades, scholarship on the role and function of intergovernmental bureaucracies in global environmental governance has burgeoned. Studies have shown that the activities of these public agencies go far beyond fulfilling delegated tasks by state principals. They have been labeled as knowledge-brokers, negotiation facilitators, or capacity builders, exerting various forms of influence on policy outcomes within their respective issue areas (Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009, p. 47). Through extensive case-study research, we have gained a better understanding of the influence international bureaucracies have, particularly within the UN. In this context, international bureaucracies have proven adept in rallying member states under their dedicated framework conventions (Hickmann et al., 2019; Jörgens et al., 2017; Michaelowa & Michaelowa, 2013), or have engaged in interplay management to address areas of overlapping jurisdictions, such as biodiversity and trade (Jinnah, 2010, 2014; Jinnah & Lindsay, 2015). Recent studies have shed light on ways international bureaucracies reach out and connect with relevant sub- and non-state actors to build new alliances within their respective regimes (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017; Hickmann & Elsässer, 2020).

However, we still know little about the potential of intergovernmental bureaucracies to address ecological and political overlap within fragmented, hybrid regime complexes. Informed by research on interplay management, this article fills a gap on the *means* and related *effects* with which intergovernmental bureaucracies coordinate with the bureaucracies of other UN environmental institutions to advance coherent institutional responses to interrelated transboundary environmental problems. Using a qualitative case study approach, I focus

on the three treaty secretariats of the Rio Conventions, that is, the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC), the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD), and the *United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* (UNCCD). While each convention has distinct governance targets and maintains an independent legal status, there are also significant interrelations among them. They are operating within the same system of institutions—the UN—and resolving their underlying problems requires integrated solutions, particularly in areas of common interest, such as agriculture, forests, or land-use (IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2022). This interconnectedness underscores the feasibility of conceptualizing the Rio Conventions as a cluster. Overall, the article offers both an empirical and theoretical contribution and seeks to advance our knowledge on coordination mechanisms for studying instances and potential effects of institutional interaction within complex governance systems, thereby contributing to emergent research on collective agency in hybrid regime complexes.

In the following, I first conduct an empirical analysis of the effects of the treaty secretariats' joint interplay management activities in fulfilling three governance tasks: advancing knowledge and discourse, influencing norm-building processes for regulatory coherence, and building capacity and supporting joint implementation. Second, based on the analysis, I extrapolate a mid-range mechanistic theory that explicates the process linking joint interplay management activities to these effects using process-tracing methods. This step allows for identifying potential obstacles that may hinder the effectiveness of such activities in promoting coherence among interacting institutions. Against this background, I will conclude by assessing the potential and limitations of joint interplay management towards addressing ecological and political overlap as well as highlight avenues for future research.

## 2 | TREATY SECRETARIATS AS INTERPLAY MANAGERS WITHIN HYBRID REGIME COMPLEXES

This study contributes to and connects three strands of literature in global environmental governance. First, it adds to broadening our understanding of the role, function, and influence of international bureaucracies in global environmental governance. Skeptics have argued that international bureaucracies merely fulfill administrative and technical services as agents to their principals, confined by the delegated powers of national governments (e.g., Drezner, 2007). However, more recent evidence suggests that bureaucracies can in fact act autonomously to a relative degree and exert influence on decision-making in many policy domains (e.g., Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009; Hickmann et al., 2019; Jörgens et al., 2017). Since hierarchical rule or the delegation of orders lie beyond their mandates, they do this in strategic and creative ways by leveraging their interests through soft and indirect modes of governance, often invisible to mere observers (Abbott et al., 2015). For example, by coordinating

and steering various transnational governance initiatives, bureaucracies have contributed to ‘opening up’ international organizations to actors other than national governments (Tallberg et al., 2013), thereby taking up the role of orchestrators and forging ‘new alliances’ with non-state actors to pressure target groups towards more ambitious governance targets (e.g., Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017; Hickmann & Elsässer, 2020), become active in agenda-setting, or otherwise advocate for policy change (Johnson, 2016; Mai & Elsässer, 2022).

Second and connected, this research adds to the literature on institutional interplay with particular focus on the area of joint interplay management. Institutional interplay generally pertains to situations in which the performance and/or development of one institution is affected by another institution (Oberthür & Stokke, 2011; Söderström & Kern, 2017). As a particular form of institutional interplay, joint interplay or overlap management describes the deliberate efforts of two or more actors to improve the interactions between at least two institutions that are independent in terms of membership and decision-making processes, yet share political and/or functional interdependencies as they address the same issue area (Jinnah, 2010; Oberthür, 2009; Stokke, 2020). Research on such interplay management investigates the effectiveness of joint interventions as a policy response to jurisdictional overlap to harness synergies among interacting institutions. Studies on interplay management, along with other actor-centric research strategies, have remained a less researched area in the literature on institutional interplay. This study contributes both empirically and theoretically to furthering our understanding about the mechanisms of joint interplay management and its implications for improved inter-institutional relationships as a consequence of such interventions.

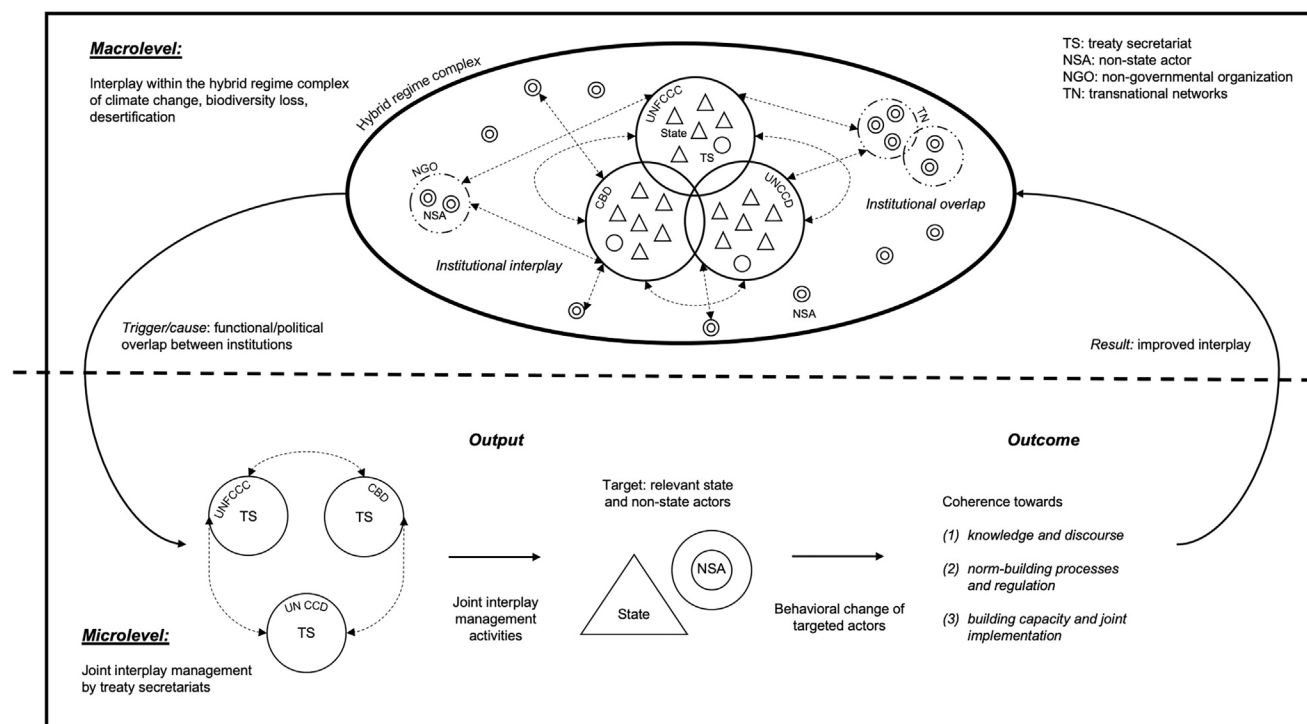
Third, this article contributes to emerging literature on collective agency in hybrid regime complexes (e.g., Abbott & Faude, 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Westerwinter, 2022; Green & Auld, 2016). Situated within the broader architecture of a particular governance arena (Biermann & Kim, 2020), regime complexes have traditionally been defined as an “array of partially overlapping and non-hierarchical institutions governing a particular issue area” (Raustiala & Victor, 2004, p. 279). Across environmental policy domains, governance architectures today are increasingly fragmented, encompassing a diverse mix of institutions and actors beyond interstate-processes and intergovernmental organizations, spanning transitional initiatives and networks, public-private partnerships, or actors from business and civil society (Andonova, 2017; Gordon, 2020; Vabulas & Snidal, 2020). This setting has given rise to the notion of “hybrid regime complexes” (Abbott & Faude, 2021), which has rejuvenated an older scholarly debate about the question whether regime complexity and fragmentation ultimately pose benefits or disadvantages to effectively combating transboundary environmental problems. Despite extensive mapping exercises of existing regime complexes (e.g., Dias Guerra et al., 2015; Widerberg, 2016), we still need to better understand the interactions between ‘traditional’, intergovernmental institutions and ‘new’, hybrid institutions, including transnational governance initiatives (Elsässer et al., 2022). This pertains particularly to questions of agency and the ways in which actors are able to navigate such ‘new’

institutions to shape political outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to a new wave of research assessing the processes of and within (increasingly) complex governance systems to improve institutional interplay through joint management activities (Zelli et al., 2020).

### 3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

By tracing the joint interplay management activities of intergovernmental secretariats within the climate-biodiversity-desertification complex, this qualitative case study seeks to provide answers to a twofold research question: *How* are secretariats jointly managing institutional interplay, and *what* are potential effects of such activities. By definition, a precondition or trigger for interplay management is a case of functional and/or political overlap between institutions addressing the same issue area (Stokke, 2020). Although interdependence originates at the systemic, or macro level of institutions, it disperses at the level of actors, or the micro level. At this micro level, joint interplay management involves horizontal coordination activities among actors across the institutions involved (Jinnah, 2014; Oberthür & Stokke, 2011). At the macro level, a desired outcome of joint management interventions is to “improve” inter-institutional relationships by harnessing synergies and avoiding conflict. As the independent variable, such normative outcome of institutional interplay has often been referred to as “coherence”, understood as a state in which interacting institutions are well-aligned by utilizing complementary or synergistic capacities to achieve compatible policy objectives (Nilsson et al., 2012; Righettini & Lizzi, 2022; Stokke, 2020).

The literature on regime effectiveness has put forward general governance tasks that actors may engage in to increase coherence through interplay management. Such tasks include, among others, building knowledge, creating norms, enhancing capacity, or enforcing compliance (e.g., Hackmann, 2016; Stokke, 2012, 2020). Building on this research, I will analyze the outcomes of joint interplay management in a three-step heuristic: First, joint interplay management activities carried out by secretariats may *advance knowledge and discourse* through changing ways in which targeted actors perceive and speak about the interlinkages between climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification. Such an outcome effect would be visible if the bureaucracies become active in generating new knowledge through joint publications and reports, strategy documents, dedicated websites, databases, or other communication tools. Knowledge dissemination may then transpire to discursive effects, if joint activities materialize through marketing campaigns, media coverage, or staging public debates with targeted actors to raise awareness. Second, joint interplay management activities might also *influence norm-building processes towards regulatory coherence*. This would be evident if the bureaucracies engage in joint outreach activities to initiate meetings with key decision makers, or otherwise target influential actors to build joint advocacy coalitions to steer norm-building processes towards coherent policy among the institutions involved. Third, outcome effects towards *building capacity and supporting joint implementation* would be visible if the secretariats impact the ability of respective state and/or non-state actors in implementing the three



**FIGURE 1** Joint interplay management in the regime complex of climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification at the macro and micro level. Own figure based on Biermann and Kim (2020).

conventions, particularly at the (sub-) national level. Capacity building could be realized through hosting workshops and knowledge training programs with targeted actors, or utilizing financial or human resources from and beyond the secretariats to jointly develop or guide projects (Figure 1).

As demonstrated by previous research on bureaucratic influence (e.g., Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009), congruency-testing for conjectured outcomes will likely produce answers to the question of *what* the effects of joint interplay activities might be. These studies have frequently refrained from including the actual activity of the bureaucracies (output) in the analysis, arguing that output indicators alone are insufficient for demonstrating the effects of social interactions as behavioral changes in targeted actors. However, to understand a process of interplay management, it seems preferable to also include outputs for understanding non-effects, that is, potentially intervening variables that may hinder or set back pathways towards successful behavioral adaptations. Further, inferring causality for pathways linking output to outcome is less complex than doing the same for outcome to impact effects, which could be influenced by a wide array of external factors that need to be controlled when making causal claims (see also Tallberg et al., 2016). I will thus combine both output and outcome in the analysis of joint interplay management (Section 4) to illustrate the process of *how* joint interplay management actually works. In so doing, I will employ process tracing to theorize a mid-range mechanistic theory for joint interplay management (Section 5) (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; George & Bennett, 2005).

For the collection and analysis of data, I employ the strategy of triangulation (Rothbauer, 2008). Besides carrying out an in-depth desk study on existing scholarly literature covering the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD Secretariat, I conducted a systematic content analysis of over 50 official documents, such as negotiation drafts and decisions from the different intergovernmental processes or various online documents published by the three secretariats in focus. Additionally, some “gray” literature was consulted, including meeting notes, think tank reports, pamphlets, or other legislative documents. These accounts were complemented by 12 semi-structured expert interviews with selected secretariat staff, of which five interviews were held in person and seven interviews were conducted online (see Appendix A for more details). Next to interviews, I carried out various participant observations and background conversations with various stakeholders, ranging from national delegates, secretariat staff, to a broad array of non-state actors. The observations and side conversations were realized at the headquarters of the secretariats as well as intergovernmental conferences, including UNFCCC COP26, UNFCCC COP27, and virtual participation in CBD COP15. All collected data, including interview transcripts and field notes, were then compiled through data management and coding software (MAXQDA) to build a comprehensive case study base and identify common themes and patterns for the joint institutional management activities of the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD Secretariat.

## 4 | FROM OUTPUT TO OUTCOME: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RIO CONVENTIONS SECRETARIATS' JOINT INTERPLAY MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

### 4.1 | Institutional context

Due to their common genesis at the 1992 UN *Earth Summit* in Rio de Janeiro, the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD are often collectively referred to as the Rio Conventions. As UN environmental institutions, they exhibit a similar organizational structure, including the Conference of the Parties (COP), other subsidiary organs, and secretariats as permanent bodies. At the secretariat level, the organigram of these agencies features a hierarchical structure with the Executive Secretary (ES) and executive staff at the top, followed by various sub-divisions to provide implementation support, administrative services, or facilitate communications and outreach activities (CBD, 2021; Melikyan, 2020; UNFCCC, 2022b). As intergovernmental agencies, secretariats are demand-driven and they act upon request of national governments. Generally, the mandates of the three secretariats are fairly similar, with each secretariat tasked to coordinate the activities of their respective conventions. This entails primarily administrative functions, providing overall organizational support, technical expertise, as well as facilitating intergovernmental negotiations at COPs (CBD, 2022; UNCCD, 2022; UNFCCC, 2022a). On matters of collaboration and coordination, each secretariat has a rather broadly specified mandate enshrined in the respective convention text (UN, 1992a, 1992b, 1994). In coordinating with other actors, such as intergovernmental as well as non-governmental organizations, transnational networks, and actors from business, civil society, and the media, the role of the secretariats is to identify and respond to systemic or market failures that might impede the overarching goals of the respective conventions (Respondent 1; 2; 4).

There are two formally recognized initiatives between the secretariats addressing the interlinkages between the Rio Conventions: The Joint Liaison Group (JLG) and the Rio Conventions Pavilion (RCP). The JLG is an internal working group among executive staff to exchange information and coordinate activities among the Rio Conventions. The group comprises the ESs of all three conventions, senior staff members of the secretariats, and representatives from scientific subsidiary bodies (CBD, 2023b). Responding to COP requests to facilitate cooperation and enhance synergies at the national and international levels, the JLG has identified three priority themes for joint interplay management activities: Adaptation, capacity building, and technology transfer (JLG, 2013a). According to secretariat staff, “activities generally pass through the JLG at some point” and their input translates to the planning of activities, which is then further specified with relevant program staff within each secretariat respectively (Respondent 3). Based on a rotating chair principle, JLG meetings are to take place at least once a year (JLG, 2013a). On public record, the JLG seemed to go dormant after its last report released in 2016. While staff admit that convening has been infrequent during that time, there was a resurgence of interest by the “highest level” in

the secretariats since 2018, with recent meetings happening on a quarterly basis (Respondent 5). Public records of these meetings are said to exist, but have not been made available yet—in part due to the overwhelming workload of UNFCCC staff (Respondent 6).

The RCP is an initiative launched by the secretariats themselves. It serves as a COP side event and online platform to raise awareness and share information about the interlinkages between climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification (Rio Conventions Pavilion, 2023a). First discussed within the JLG among ESs and senior staff (JLG, 2011), the Pavilion had its inaugural event at the 2010 CBD COP in Nagoya, Japan, as the so-called “Ecosystems Pavilion”. Post Nagoya, the initiative was rebranded to the RCP, as it was believed that the approaches discussed at the events had to transcend the CBD across all three conventions (Respondent 3; 4). Due to its genesis within the CBD space, the biodiversity secretariat has always been the patronage of the initiative and requests are directed directly to designated CBD staff. The planning, programming, and execution has primarily been at the responsibility of the CBD and CCD Secretariats (Respondent 4). The UNFCCC Secretariat has “not had the same devotion to the platform”, with a lack of capacity and available secretariat staff impeding greater support (Respondent 4; 7; 8).

Each secretariat is tasked to collect, disseminate, and share information as pertaining to their mandates on coordination. Therefore, there are various informal communication channels and exchange of information among the secretariats is ongoing and frequent. This also includes seconding personnel as a means of fostering inter-secretariat collaboration (JLG, 2004). In fact, informal exchanges have steadily increased over the past years, with staff being acquainted with their counterparts from the sister conventions if in need for assistance (Respondent 1). Generally, there is no specific budget allocated by Parties for inter-secretariat initiatives, let alone informal coordination. The financing for logistics as well as staff time required for the operation of the JLG is realized from the internal resources of each secretariat. Likewise, the RCP is funded by the secretariats to some extent, but increasingly relies on financing from external sources, such as the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), or the Green Climate Fund (GCF) (Respondent 8).

### 4.2 | Advancing knowledge and discourse

When participating in joint public events or exploring the official websites of the secretariats, raising awareness and exchanging information on the interlinkages between climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification has been a key priority. The secretariats have focused less on generating new scientific knowledge themselves, but bringing knowledge on the interlinkages and its associated risks to the forefront of discussions. In so doing, they have explored options for research partnerships to provide up-to-date information to national focal points under each convention on relevant assessments, ongoing research, or monitoring tools (JLG, 2007b). The secretariats have also been active in enhancing the inter-operability of their web-services and databases, particularly pertaining to issues of technology transfer



(JLG, 2007a, 2007b), or issued various education materials pertaining to, among others, co-benefits for adaption, forests, and gender under the three frameworks (The Rio Conventions, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Such knowledge-sharing practices have centered predominately on developing common messages and communication tools to highlight the synergetic potentials among the three environmental problems (Respondent 6).

The dissemination of such messaging has been most prominently amplified with the RCP as a space to mobilize and inspire relevant state and non-state actors (Rio Conventions Pavilion Bulletin, 2012). The side event has witnessed a “resurgence at much greater interest in integrated approaches and the practical linkages” with six of a 21 total events over the past 2 years (Respondent 5). Thematically, the RCP has covered issues directly related to the enshrined goals of each convention, such as interlinked mitigation measures to climate change, nature-based solutions, land restoration and management, food systems, or finance. Some events have also focused on more peripheral, but equally important topics, such as the role of youth, local communities, health, or gender (Rio Conventions Pavilion, 2023c). Besides responsibilities for planning and finance, secretariats are responsible for the line-up of the RCP. They set the agenda on the themes and invite selected COP participants. Such planning is anchored in strategic thinking about ways in which the conventions may reinforce perceptions of delivering common benefits (JLG, 2011). Through this forum for exchange, the secretariats have the power to push certain issues and narratives at a “practical, on-the-ground level” (Respondent 5). In discussions within the JLG, the RCP was even envisioned as a potentially useful tool to enable pre-negotiation of potential areas of common action by CBD ES Bráulio Dias. However, due to conflicting views among ESs, the RCP has remained a side event (JLG, 2016). With the overall goal to support implementation of the conventions in a coordinated manner, the RCP aims to facilitate conversations about the synergies, so that targeted actors keep them in mind when they move forward (Respondent 3).

The secretariats have also developed various joint communication strategies to approach different actor groups at the international level. For example, the three agencies have scripted a common approach at the level of executive secretariat staff. Lead by the UNCCD Secretariat, the strategy was set out as a one-page, non-public document to be included in communication by the ESs at meetings with both Parties and non-party stakeholders across the conventions. Based on past experiences with joint communication initiatives, the document was crafted to mimic “the language of text of our decisions” (Respondent 4). Through the “power of repeating” (Respondent 6), the summary should help to get a joint message across and amplify the significance and benefits of synergetic approaches towards climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification. As secretariat staff notes, such insertions of text have been picked up frequently in inter-governmental negotiations within the CBD and UNCCD, but it has been more challenging in the UNFCCC (Respondent 1; 5). As a possible reason for this, secretariat staff have frequently referred to the high stakes and politicization in climate change negotiations (Respondent 1; 2; 12).

Other inter-secretariat initiatives have also aimed at raising awareness with civil society actors, such as the so-called *Restoring Balance with Nature* campaign, launched in 2021. The initiative has primarily targeted “upper middle-class actors” to showcase examples of pressures on ecosystems and nature which produce perverse results in everyday-life, while pointing towards solutions that can be implemented by changing small habits (Respondent 3). In its launching phase, there were two dedicated RCP events at UNFCCC COP27 which promoted the approach, including a high-level session with Ministers from India, China, and the UK (Rio Conventions Pavilion, 2023b). Initiated by the UNCCD Secretariat, an external marketing company was hired to produce social media cards and joint video production for the campaign. However, a lack of funding had already suspended the campaign in 2022 and a potential resumption seems unlikely without external resources. Acquiring such funding may be complicated by the fact that the secretariats have thus far been unsuccessful in developing metrics for measuring the overall impact of the campaign (Respondent 4; 6; 7).

In sum, the secretariats have carried out a large number of inter-play management activities to advance knowledge and shape discourse about the linkages between climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification. The agencies have strategically shared information through various communication channels and facilitated dialogs through events and outreach campaigns. Joint activities have played a crucial role in “encouraging its parties within the three conventions to think about how to bring them together, without secretariats necessarily saying that this is the new paradigm that we are all going to follow” (Respondent 5). In interviews, secretariat staff frequently noted that different levels politicization and the degree to which commonalities between certain issue areas are sufficiently recognized across the different systems frequently hinder progress with the joint agenda (Respondent 1; 2; 7; 9).

#### 4.3 | Influencing norm-building processes towards regulatory coherence

As administrative bodies, secretariats do not have a direct mandate to participate in inter-state negotiations or advise on policy. They are supposed to be impartial, neutral bodies (Hickmann & Elsässer, 2020). Influence on norm-building processes towards regulatory coherence is thus notoriously difficult to trace, as it remains a controversial mode of engagement for secretariats. However, there are some examples of such influence, particularly those building on orchestration practices (e.g., Abbott et al., 2015), such as joint advocacy and outreach. The secretariats have actively sought intermediary support from state- and non-state actors as means to promote the interlinkages agenda. For joint advocacy, the joint interplay management activities have had not only effects on knowledge and discourse, but also norm-building processes, which may be “forming the seeds of eventual policy work” (Respondent 5). This is visible particularly through the RCP as a space where ideas and themes are showcased that are hoped to make their way into inter-state negotiations. For change in political outcomes to

happen, secretariats aim to “create those spaces where influential actors come together” (Respondent 4).

Nature-based solutions is one example of such effects on policy development, which was prominently featured in RCP programs and became a buzzword at recent COPs (Rio Conventions Pavilion, 2023c). In previous years, considerations for ways in which nature can offer solutions in dealing with climate change was shut down by a number of Parties due to concerns towards preempting negotiations, especially within the UNFCCC (Respondent 9). According to secretariat staff, the frequent dialogs and outreach activities with both state and non-state actors at the RCP can be seen as a “turning point” on bringing together solutions to the interlinked problems, which have carried over to the negotiation space (Respondent 3). While “it does not say it on the box, [...] nature-based solutions are CBD and UNCCD – they just don't call it that” (Respondent 1). Particularly at the UNFCCC COP26, nature-based solutions to climate change was a core theme throughout the conference and featured prominently in the RCP program. Even though specific references to nature-based solutions was taken out after a final round of negotiations on the Glasgow Climate Pact (Respondent 9), there was recognition of the interlinkages with regards to the “critical role of protecting, conserving and restoring nature and ecosystems” (UNFCCC, 2021). Nature-based solutions was again on the agenda at the following UNFCCC COP27 in Egypt, where it is explicitly mentioned in the cover decision (UNFCCC, 2022c). The example indicates the contested nature of integrated approaches across policy domains, which may be more profound than a particular wording. However, it also goes to show that the joint advocacy activities of the secretariats, such as the RCP, can be influential in driving the agenda on synergetic approaches forward.

For joint outreach, interplay management activities have focused particularly on engagement with high-level champions and COP Presidencies. On the occasion of the Rio +20 conference 2012, for example, ESs decided on convening sessions with incoming and outgoing COP Presidencies for all conventions as a means to share current information and proposals for addressing the interlinkages within intergovernmental negotiations (JLG, 2011). ESs strategized how “to win some high level champions to support the draft negotiation text on synergies among Rio Conventions” (JLG, 2011). Recently, the secretariats have offered guidance for an initiative led by the UK Presidency at UNFCCC COP26 who were devoted to getting towards a decision on nature-based solutions, including the land agenda (Respondent 5). In the run-up to the conference, the UK presidency consulted with the secretariats on drafting a compelling case and a high-level joint statement that would bring together different Presidencies under each convention beyond Glasgow (Respondent 2). Even though this tripartite initiative was “exceedingly close” to launch, it stalled in the final stages due to the limited time of the UK Presidency, which ended at UNFCCC COP27 (Respondent 4; 6). It has remained unclear how this initiative could be revitalized, but the secretariats anticipate a “loose interaction and mechanism” to enable a connection between the Presidencies of the COPs going forward (Respondent 5). The secretariats have also engaged COP Presidencies

through the RCP. At COP27, for example, Yasmine Fouad, former CBD COP14 President and a leading negotiator at Sharm El-Sheikh, expressed her readiness to push for a partnership on nature-based solutions among Parties, supported by the Egyptian Presidency.

The secretariats have also aimed at addressing the linkages between climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification within national planning frameworks. Priorities identified in inter-secretariat activities can be found in frameworks, such as Nationally Determined Contributions, National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans, or Land Degradation Neutrality Targets (Respondent 2). Proposals for coordinating national planning frameworks has dated back to discussions within the JLG (JLG, 2004, 2007b). In some instances, functional overlap among planning frameworks was believed to be 70% (JLG, 2010). By offering technical guidance or providing relevant background materials, the secretariats have supported the inclusion of targets for addressing the interlinkages in these frameworks (Respondent 9). As the secretariats are not authorized to support revisions in national action plans directly, e.g., through dedicated workshops, the agencies have acted “behind the scenes offering encouragement [and] helping to review drafts” (Respondent 9). For example, currently a total of 24 NDCs have elaborated on actions, plans, or strategies with co-benefits for biodiversity and ecosystems, and a total of 26 national targets under the CBD prioritize simultaneously addressing biodiversity, climate change, and desertification (CBD, 2023a; Klimalog, 2023).

In conclusion, there has been some limited evidence of interplay management outputs to impact norm-building processes and outcomes towards regulatory coherence. The secretariats have been most influential in joint advocacy and outreach to facilitate norm-building processes at early stages, or when timing activities to catalyze developments as they already move along. Such orchestrated processes have largely depended on intermediary support from other influential actors, such as high-level champions, COP Presidencies, or non-state actor involvement within the RCP. Some of these activities have even transpired towards integrated policy development in national planning frameworks, although such influence is difficult to causally relate to joint interplay management efforts as a sufficient explanation for an outcome.

#### 4.4 | Building capacity and supporting joint implementation

UN treaty secretariat budgets are generally limited to cover mostly costs. These constraints also hold true for the three Rio Conventions Secretariats, including the UNFCCC Secretariat, which is substantially better resourced compared to the other agencies (Respondent 3). Thus, the secretariats have to be innovative in how to obtain resources for activities, which is one reason for the “close working-relationship” with multilateral development funds, such as the GEF and GCF (Respondent 3). As the main financial mechanism for the Rio Conventions, the GEF has for a number of funding rounds required that the three Conventions need to be considered within project



proposals at the national level (Respondent 9). The secretariats have provided guidance to the GEF at the secretariat level to identify windows of opportunity for funding that the GEF then translates to Parties (Respondent 3; 12). In some instances, the agencies have offered advisory services to Parties to incorporate the synergies into their project development to take advantage of the “fungibility of [GEF] budget lines” (Respondent 1). Similarly, the secretariats can “make a case” to the GCF about financing projects across the three sectors to support implementation—a relationship that has evolved to be “more flexible” over recent years (Respondent 1). The three secretariats have also approached both the GEF and GCF as co-hosts to provide external funding for the RCP, which has become increasingly costly for the secretariats to carry out on their own (Respondent 3; 4).

In the past, there have been few capacity-building activities focused at the national and regional level carried out by the three agencies. Driven by the UNCCD, who launched a *National Synergy Workshops Programme* in late 2000, its secretariat convened a total of 24 workshops between 2000 and 2004 to compile information and insights regarding the development of synergistic efforts in the implementation of the three conventions, particularly aimed at harmonize regional and national action plans (UNCCD, 2002, 2006). From 2003 to 2004, the three secretariats hosted other workshops, including events exploring synergies among the national focal points of all three conventions, or a regional-level workshops on forests and forest ecosystems or exploring benefits for addressing interlinkages particularly for African countries (CBD, 2004a, 2004b; IISD, 2004). Although ESs have expressed desire to do more regional and sub-regional workshops, the format has been discontinued (JLG, 2013b). According to staff members, internal functional review process within the conventions sought to increase cost efficiencies, resulting in orders to “scale back” capacity-building practices of the secretariats, as other agencies, such as UNEP, UNDP, or FAO, were seen “in a better place to provide that kind of support” (Respondent 9). The secretariats have been regularly invited to complement capacity-building workshops through advisory services, but their role has been more “hands-off” (Respondent 9).

With its unique role in supporting project implementation through the Global Mechanism (see UNCCD, 2023), the desertification secretariat has most vigorously pursued joint capacity-building efforts among the three Rio Conventions Secretariats. Under ES Monique Barbut, the UNCCD Secretariat proposed a “Project Preparation Facility” for the three secretariats in 2017 to raise financial resources that would support the development of joint projects at the national level (JLG, 2016, 2017). The proposal sought for each secretariat to raise approx. Six million USD in funding—a task most difficult for the small UNCCD secretariat (Respondent 1). However, the proposal was rejected by the ESs of the UNFCCC and CBD on the grounds of insufficient mandates and a lack of resources (Respondent 7). In response, the UNCCD Secretariat is currently planning to revamp the initiative as a “Project Preparation Partnership”. The updated version would pool resources beyond the secretariats, including multilateral development funds, UN agencies, and private sector donors. These resources would then be made available for projects supporting national

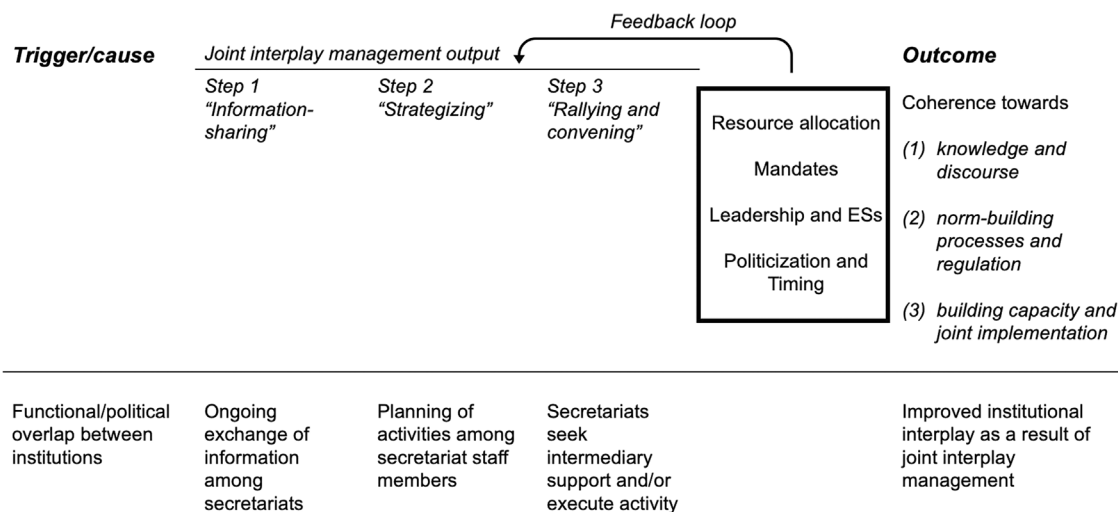
implementation if they fulfill two criteria: First, the projects have to be sustainable and scalable over time and, second, they must fulfill targets in accordance with all three Rio Conventions (Respondent 6; 7). The secretariats would actively guide project development to fast-track proposals, including assistance with early concept notes, feasibility studies, agenda analysis, or other expertise the secretariats can provide (Respondent 1). Senior staff from the UNFCCC and CBD expressed general agreement with the amendments, highlighting that the terminology of “facility” and “program” will make a decisive difference for gaining state support within their conventions (Respondent 2; 5). Ultimately, “when you talk about financial resources, then governments are becoming much more focused on what the secretariats are doing” (Respondent 2).

The challenges associated with capacity building and finance illustrate the constraints for secretariats to carry out joint activities, particularly those addressing interlinkages at the national level. The secretariats have orchestrated other multilateral financial institutions, such as the GEF and GCF, to secure funding for sustaining their joint activities, but also identify financing opportunities for joint implementation. A number of workshops indicate that secretariats have explored options for building capacity themselves, however, budget cuts and differences in mandates have complicated such endeavors. The UNCCD Secretariat, authorized to provide consultancy services and implementation support through the Global Mechanism, has advocated most prominently for joint capacity building, with secretariats playing a role in identifying potential donors and supporting project development at the national level. As one CBD senior staff member summarizes: “There has been a lot of discussion and recognition of the need of coordinated implementation, but more has to happen. The JLG and the work of the Executive Secretaries raises these issues, but it hasn't really carried out at national level, and a lot of that still has to start for this to happen” (Respondent 3).

## 5 | THEORIZING A PROCESS FOR JOINT INTERPLAY MANAGEMENT

The analysis demonstrates that the three secretariats have addressed various aspects of the interlinkages between the Rio Conventions through joint interplay management activities. They have advanced knowledge and discourse to change ways in which relevant actors think and speak about issues. To some extent, the secretariats have been able to influence norm-building processes, advance integrated policy development, build capacities, or support efforts in joint implementation of the three Rio Conventions. To explain these effects, but also the variance between them, it is necessary to further assess *how* the output, that is, the joint interplay management activities carried out by the three agencies, may be related to such outcomes.

The activities investigated allow for extrapolating a general three-step pattern joint interplay management: First, secretariats continuously *share information* among each other, including specific instructions by national governments, granular information relating to political processes, non-state action, or experiences in



**FIGURE 2** A mechanism for joint interplay management.

implementation. Second, such information-sharing enables *strategizing* activities as means of addressing systemic failures or harnessing synergies across institutional boundaries. Taking the particular interests of each secretariat into account, executive staff identifies strategic themes for collaboration, which are pitched to relevant staff units within the agencies to detail and develop opportunities for joint activities. Strategizing describes the process from abstract ideas to concrete action, which also entails planning for required resources both in terms of finance and staffing capacities. Third, the secretariats *rally and convene* relevant actors and move forward with the joint activity. This final step may also include orchestrating third-party actors, such as non-state actors, if such alliances are perceived to bolster the chances for more impactful outcomes.

This process of coordination reflects a rather ideal-case scenario for joint interplay management. However, the analysis indicates more complex coordination scenarios and secretariats have to take a number of interrelated variables into account, which create feedback loops and intervene stages of strategizing and carrying out activities through rallying and convening. Based on the case study analysis and interview data, four variables can be identified: (1) resource allocation, (2) mandate, (3) leadership and the role of ESs, and (4) politicization and timing (Figure 2).

First, the allocation and continuity of resources to carry out activities have a significant impact on joint interplay management approaches. This includes both financial resources and staffing for planning and executing joint activities. Secretariat funding has been routinely restricted as a means to enhance cost efficiencies for Parties. The three secretariats have thus relied on external funding from third-party actors, such as multilateral development funds, UN agencies, or specific governmental donors, to carry out joint activities. A lack of funding has been a particular issue for joint advocacy, including the *Restoring Balance with Nature* campaign, or the RCP. Secretariat staff admits that the latter has been "a little bit starved" since its last stand-alone event at COP21 in Paris (Respondent 6). Over the past years, the Pavilion has been steadily reduced from a full

two-week program to four sessions co-hosted at the GEF/GCF Pavilion at recent COPs. For future endeavors, secretariats have also contemplated options for bringing in funding from the private sector, which would be a novel approach for both the CBD and UNCCD, having raised concerns of potential interference with private interests (Respondent 4; 11).

Second, mandates for UN treaty secretariats share various similarities. However, there are also distinct differences with direct implications for what they might be able to achieve when coordinating across policy domains. For example, the roles and mandates assigned to the JLG by each convention have not been fully aligned, which has frequently created disagreement among the secretariats when executing requested activities (JLG, 2009). With a "deeper interest and curiosity from Parties to explore the synergies" in recent years, secretariat staff have also expressed the need for more encompassing mandates, particularly regarding a focus for joint coordination at the national level (Respondent 10). Such visions have yet to transpire to COP decisions, to which secretariats are ultimately bound. The UNFCCC Secretariat has been particularly reluctant to engage in activities that target the national affairs in fear of state pushback and potential consequences for intergovernmental relations within its own process (Respondent 8). Consequently, the climate secretariat has been much more "straightjacketed" in joint activities as opposed to its counterparts (Busch, 2009). By contrast, the analysis alludes to a more entrepreneurial role of the biodiversity and desertification secretariats in their efforts to steer institutional relations between the Rio Conventions.

Third, joint interplay management activities have been dependent on leadership and the role of particular ESs. While some ESs were considerably invested in the synergies agenda with innovative ideas, others were rather passive. According to secretariat staff, the impact ESs can have goes long ways in promoting joint activities, but they also have to be mindful not to cross a line where it seems that they are fundraising for the other convention (Respondent 6; 11). For example, Ahmed Djoghla has been characterized as a particularly visionary ES,

who saw his mandate “being much greater than other Executive Secretaries” (Respondent 9). His priorities included, among others, exploring options for a joint COP format across the three conventions or greater engagement with non-state actors, which ultimately led to the establishment of the RCP (JLG, 2010). However, his broad interpretation of mandate also sparked differences of opinion among Parties, which was “probably one thing that contributed to his downfall” (Respondent 5). Other ESs, such as Hamdallah Zedan (CBD) or Christina Figueres (UNFCCC), were remembered as leaders who prioritized a dedicated focus on filling in gaps within their respective programs of work, which meant that inter-agency coordination was “not much on their radar” (Respondent 3). In fact, Christina Figueres frequently alluded to “the political risks” of ambitious proposals, particularly those targeting state actors and implementation activities in the aftermath of the failed Copenhagen Accord in 2009 (JLG, 2010, 2011). For ESs, prioritizing the work on synergies with the other Rio Conventions Secretariats would be weighing a decision towards potentially “tying yourself to the slowest moving horse” (Respondent 1).

Fourth, politicization and timing play a significant role for the success of joint interplay management. The analysis demonstrates that strategizing and executing joint activities between the three secretariats has often been influenced by macro-events—especially within the UNFCCC. Compared to negotiations on biodiversity loss and desertification, the stakes of climate change have felt to be much higher due to the overwhelming financial investment required to transform global economies away from fossil fuels, while keeping trade-offs for sustainable development at a minimum. The complexity of this process, also reflected in the myriad linkages among internal items, is much less in the other Rio Conventions (Respondent 7; 12). The rapid growth of the climate process has meant that the UNFCCC, including its secretariat, has prioritized agenda items that are achievable, thus being less attentive to the other processes with exceedingly circumscribed room for maneuvering (Respondent 4). At the same time, politicization also plays a role in the way secretariats may utilize non-state advocacy, as some non-state actors have been gravitating away from UNCCD and CBD towards climate. These developments have compelled the secretariats to “jump on the wave of climate change” for advancing the synergies agenda and driving the three interrelated processes forward (Respondent 6; 7). As one CBD Senior staff member put candidly: “How can we open that space within the UNFCCC agenda so that issues such as ecosystems, genetic diversity, or land degradation have a role? [...] The issue is, I don't think we've been incredibly successful in terms of getting into the climate process” (Respondent 3).

The varying degree and pace to which climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification have been politicized links to timing as a crucial factor for collaborative efforts. Timing pertains to awareness of ongoing and developing politicization to strategically push emerging themes, or insert new ideas that originate within the secretariats at the right time to influence public discourse. Planning and executing joint activities is “not necessarily about one meeting or one discussion, but all of a sudden this new concept is going to emerge and blossom” (Respondent 9). As demonstrated by the example of nature-based solutions, secretariat interventions have been most

impactful for advancing integrated approaches through orchestrated joint advocacy and outreach, if such activities are timed to coincide with interests of other relevant actors with compatible governance targets.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article has offered empirical and theoretical insights into the question of how and with what effects treaty secretariats can jointly manage and improve institutional interplay in the hybrid regime complex governing climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification. Evaluating the effects of joint interplay management ultimately depends on the yardstick applied to measure outcomes. From a perspective of increasing coherence through the implementation of the frequently talked about synergies across the three Rio Conventions, secretariats have not been able to “walk the talk”. Such synergies have been slow to emerge in negotiated policy outcomes, as secretariats need to consider the allocation and continuity of resources, differences in mandates, leadership and individual priorities of executive staff, and the varying degree and pace of politicization in the three policy arenas relating to timing their joint activities. Certainly, such impact—or lack thereof—is to be expected from the primary function these agencies are tasked to fulfill, which is servicing requests within the confined mandates provided by national governments. With forum shopping behavior and differences in state membership under each process, some governments might be reluctant or even opposed towards efforts enhancing institutional coherence across regimes at the cost of sovereignty (Murphy & Kellow, 2013). To some extent, the case study thus confirms the limitations of joint interplay management described by Oberthür (2009), which ultimately lack outcome effectiveness in face of the shadow of hierarchy posed by diverging state interests.

However, secretariats have nonetheless been able to shape preferences and behavior, revealing the balancing act of principal-agent relationships (Respondent 2). They have utilized the leeway within their mandates creatively and frequently avoided state objection, while “mobilizing and facilitating [...] in a way that becomes automatic and self-generating down the line” (Respondent 4). The secretariats do this by coordinating with influential actors beyond the agencies themselves, rallying support from COP Presidencies and party champions, raising financial resources with other agencies, or convening with non-state actors and transnational governance initiatives to build coalitions that further their common interest. The study thus substantiates previous findings that secretariats readily employ orchestration as a mode of governance to influence targeted actors in a “soft and indirect” way (Abbott et al., 2015; Hickmann & Elsässer, 2020; Mai & Elsässer, 2022). In fact, such practices are used not only within their respective institutional environment, but across policy areas to govern the interactions of institutions within hybrid regime complexes. Particularly regarding the effects of joint interplay management towards advancing knowledge, discourse, norm-building processes, and

building joint capacities, orchestration has been a work-around solution in face of limited mandates and resources to address the interlinkages through intermediary support. By taking advantage of actors and initiatives beyond the state, these results indicate that secretariats have nonetheless advanced management of the complex interlinkages to some degree.

The study has demonstrated that joint interplay management is an important, yet understudied mode of engagement for dealing with institutional overlap and interdependent policy fields. I thus conclude by outlining three fruitful avenues for future research. First, given the increasing convergence of intergovernmental and transnational governance in many areas of global environmental politics, we need to better understand the means and mechanisms with which different approaches can be harmonized. Transnational governance initiatives are viewed as crucial for filling governance gaps and driving ambitions of intergovernmental processes. In global climate politics, for example, the Paris Agreement stipulates non-state climate action as an integral part for its implementation. Future studies should thus focus on identifying (groups of) actors—also beyond intergovernmental bureaucracies—that are able to (jointly) manage different approaches for more effective and synergistic institutional responses to transboundary environmental problems. Such focus may also broaden our knowledge of potential consequences for (joint) interplay management, for example in overcoming treaty congestion or mitigating contested multilateralism.

Second, further conceptual research is needed to more thoroughly explore conditions for successfully managing the interplay between overlapping institutions. The process theory put forward in this article could serve as an entry point for investigating situations of interplay management in different cases. We also need to better understand what are intervening or extraneous variables for (joint) interplay management and how to address such variables to further opportunities for coherence and integration among institutions. This may include cases of mismanagement and competition, for example, if the alignment of preferences among managing actors may change over time. It is also unclear how interplay management may respond to and adequately deal with unintended systemic effects in hybrid regime complexes, such as environmental problem-shifting (Kim & van Asselt, 2016).

Finally, except for some older accounts on ocean governance (e.g., Stokke, 2012), research on interplay management has predominantly focused on the policy areas of climate change and biodiversity loss—this study being no exception to this trend. There is an urgent need for future research to explore options for (joint) interplay management in other regime complexes and interfaces in environmental governance, such as the water-energy-food nexus, but also interactions including environmental and non-environmental institutions.

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## APPENDIX A

### A.1 | List of interviews conducted

Respondent 1: Interview with a senior staff from the UNCCD Secretariat, November 24, 2022 (virtual).

Respondent 2: Interview with a senior staff member from the UNFCCC Secretariat, December 5, 2022 (virtual).

Respondent 3: Interview with a senior staff member from the CBD Secretariat, November 8, 2021, Glasgow, UK (in person).

Respondent 4: Interview with a senior staff member from the CBD Secretariat, November 10, 2022, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt (in person).

Respondent 5: Interview with a senior staff member from the CBD Secretariat, November 10, 2022, Montreal, Canada (in person).

Respondent 6: Interview with a senior staff from the UNCCD Secretariat, November 24, 2022 (virtual).

Respondent 7: Interview with a senior staff from the UNCCD Secretariat, November 12, 2022, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt (in person).

Respondent 8: Interview with a senior staff member from the UNFCCC Secretariat, May 5, 2022 (virtual).

Respondent 9: Interview with a senior staff member from the CBD Secretariat, November 10, 2022, Montreal, Canada (in person).

Respondent 10: Interview with a senior staff from the UNCCD Secretariat, June 10, 2021 (virtual).

Respondent 11: Interview with a senior staff member from the CBD Secretariat, May 26, 2021 (virtual).

Respondent 12: Interview with a senior staff member from the UNFCCC Secretariat, May 10, 2022 (virtual).