

UNEP, INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE AND THE ROAD TO RIO+20

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Abstract

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The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was mandated as the principal body of the United Nations in the field of the environment by the General Assembly in its resolution 2997 (XXVII) of 15 December 1972. Included within this mandate is the promotion of international cooperation in the field of environment and the provision of general policy guidance for the direction and coordination of environmental programmes within the United Nations system. Other key roles include keeping the world environmental situation under review and exchanging environmental knowledge and information on technical aspects of the formulation and implementation of environmental programmes within the United Nations system.

In accordance with these mandates, and as underscored by the Nairobi Declaration on the Role and Mandate of the UNEP, the role of UNEP is to be the leading global environmental authority and in that role to set the global environment agenda, to promote the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and to serve as an authoritative advocate for the global environment.

This assigned role is an extremely complex one, with new and emerging issues, adding to the environmental challenges already faced by the world today. In order to fulfil this role, UNEP bridges science and policy through environmental monitoring, assessments and information and facilitates international platforms for policy debate, negotiations and decision-making such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). UNEP also works with its member states and the global community in facilitating the development of environmental law and provides assistance to Member States in strengthening their national, sub-regional and regional policies, laws and institutions. It recognises the increasingly important need for cooperation among States and various non-State actors to address environmental issues of common concern collectively, looking at the world as a global commons and recognising that the natural environment knows no political borders, and this understanding is at the heart of UNEP's work.

To achieve its mandate UNEP undertakes normative functions at the global level, coordinating functions at the regional level and catalytic operational activities at the national level, focussing on six priority sub-programmatic themes (Climate Change, Disasters and Conflicts, Ecosystem Management, Environmental Governance, Harmful Substances and Hazardous Wastes and Resource Efficiency). The development of UNEP's programmes, projects and activities is directed through the decisions of its Governing Council and the Global Ministerial Environment Forum.

Through these decision-making processes, a decision was adopted in 2002 on International Environmental Governance (IEG), tasking UNEP with contributing to international efforts aimed at strengthening international environmental governance. This focus has remained as a point of discussion at subsequent Governing Councils, and in 2009 the UNEP Governing Council launched a process with Ministers of Environment to look at what the prerequisites for a well-functioning IEG system. They agreed on the basic objectives and functions of what such a system might be at a series of discussion meetings.

The purpose of strengthening the IEG system is to ensure that developing countries can better access the expertise and resources of the UN system to help countries define and achieve environmental goals as an integral part of and to the benefit, of their development processes. There are 44 UN agencies currently engaged in environment to a greater or lesser degree, which reflects the interrelatedness between environmental and other challenges. It also underscores the need for ensuring coherence to deliver better and in a more integrated and coherent manner on the ground in response to countries own development objectives.

The broad IEG system basically consists of three types of organizations and constituencies:

- a) Organizations whose primary and principal focus is on the environment (e.g. UNEP, MEA convention secretariats), and who are for the most part governed by environment ministries.
- b) Specialized organizations whose activities and operations are related to environment, but for whom environment is not a principal focus (e.g. FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP, WHO etc.). These are typically governed by different line ministries agriculture, labour, education, health etc.
- c) Organizations with a broad development mandate that includes environment in an operational country-based context (e.g. UNDP, the World Bank, regional development banks). These are typically governed by finance, planning, foreign and development ministries.

And these organisations are also working at the heart of sustainable development, bringing the understanding that we need to look for concrete options of how to improve the IEG system within the context of governance for sustainable development and in doing so contribute to a more effective sustainable development system. In this way Rio+20 is an opportunity to rethink, recorder and restructure governance of the environmental pillar as part of a broader effort to enhance the governance of sustainable development. Moving towards the goal of achieving sustainable development requires that all three pillars are mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing, without one being developed at the expense of the other.

At present, this situation does not exist as recognised by the Secretary-General in his report prepared for the first Preparatory Committee in preparation for Rio+20 (to take place in 2012), which pointed to the lack of convergence and maybe increasing divergence between the environmental pillar and the two other pillars of sustainable development. Despite the almost 40 years that have passed since the Stockholm Conference, this first conference to clearly link environment and human development, the environment is still treated somewhat like the "newcomer in the class". The fact that environment underpins development in many other areas is reflected in the broad engagement of UN system entities in environment, but it is not reflected in the overall international governance architecture. Intergovernmental bodies dealing with environment and environment-related matters are placed lower in the international institutional hierarchy than intergovernmental bodies dealing with other subject matters. Strengthening international environmental governance needs take place with a view to enhance convergence with the economic and social pillars of sustainable development. This means a better linkage between the environment agenda and the vital policy areas of economic growth, reducing poverty and inequality, democratic governance, the empowerment of women, etc. Therefore the IEG discussion should not be seen in isolation but rather as part and parcel of the discussion leading up to Rio+20.

To develop a system-wide strategy for environment in the United Nations system to increase the effectiveness, efficiency and coherence of it in a way contributes to strengthening the environmental pillar of sustainable development is an urgent need. The strategy should increase interagency cooperation and clarify the division of labour within the United Nations system. It should be developed through an inclusive process involving Governments and seeking input from civil society.

We need to look to the creation of a stronger link between global environmental policy making and financing aimed at widening and deepening the funding base for environment with the goal of securing sufficient, predictable and coherent funding and increasing accessibility, cooperation and coherence among financing mechanisms and funds for the environment, to bridge the policy-implementation gap through new revenue streams for implementation. We also need to continue to strengthen strategic engagement at the regional level by further increasing the capacity of UNEP regional offices to be more responsive to regional, sub-regional and country environmental needs. The aim of such strengthening should be to increase on-the-ground responsiveness and implementation.

Developing countries, which depend directly on the environment for their livelihoods and their means of living, are the ones with the most at stake in terms of environmental sustainability. We therefore have to ensure that the decisions taken at the global level relate to the national level where the impact is felt. If we do not consider the real issues that are faced by people on the ground and decision makers who have limited resources and have to prioritize actions, no progress will be made. As in so many development-related issues, full stakeholders involvement and a bottom-up approach is vital. This also has to be at the core of our discussions and decisions at Rio+20.