



**United Nations
Environment
Programme**



UNEP (DEPI)/RS.13 /WP.9.RS

Original: ENGLISH

13th Global Meeting of the Regional Seas
Conventions and Action Plans
Busan, Korea, 3 – 5 October 2011

Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development

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Strengthening the institutional framework for sustainable development: the environmental pillar

Note by the secretariat

Introduction

1. Nearly a decade after the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26 August to 4 September 2002, the challenges of environmental sustainability and sustainable development have become more pronounced, while the world's interconnectedness and interdependence have dramatically increased. There is a growing recognition by the public and the diplomatic community of the need to manage these problems through closer global cooperation; the current global governance architecture, however, is struggling to adapt, and some believe that the international system has reached an evolutionary crossroads.¹ The international organizations that were established in another era are finding it difficult to cope with the common challenges facing the international community. There is a need to rethink how we tackle these challenges and to reinforce the commitment to the international order that was put in place to manage problems that cannot be solved by a single country and instead require collective action by a committed and cooperative international community.

2. To meet the goals of sustainable development it is essential that there is an effective institutional framework at all levels and that full consideration is given to all three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. An international governance system involves the institutions and mechanisms responsible for the entire process, integrating all aspects of sustainable development and the institutions specializing in the three key areas. To make progress towards sustainability, the overall structure must be strengthened and the individual components enhanced.

3. Since it will have as one of its themes the "institutional framework for sustainable development", the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (commonly known as "Rio +20") will present a valuable opportunity both to think creatively about how to ensure that the three pillars of sustainable development are equally strong and to take action outside the constrained framework of institutions within which the international community usually operates.

4. Regarding the environment pillar, the high-level consultative process on broader international environmental governance reform established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Council in its decision SS.XI/1 of 26 February 2010 has led to several proposals to strengthen and improve coherence in the international environmental governance system. The aim of those proposals, set out in the Nairobi-Helsinki Outcome,² is to establish an international environmental governance system capable of achieving the objectives and performing the functions identified by an earlier consultative group of ministers and high-level representatives, established by the Governing Council in its decision 25/4, whose work came to be known as the "Belgrade Process".

5. The Nairobi-Helsinki Outcome is a positive step towards more coherence between economic, social and environmental interests throughout the United Nations system. Questions remain, however, as to the relationship between the current institutional structures for environmental sustainability and those for the economic and social sectors, in addition to whether an overarching institutional framework for sustainable development can be created.

6. The present note outlines the reform process as undertaken by the consultative groups established by the UNEP Governing Council and the current gaps in the international environmental governance regime, and shows the importance and fundamental value of environmental sustainability to economic development, social welfare and human well-being. It also outlines some main options for strengthening environmental sustainability. It focuses on the governance of the environmental pillar and argues that if the framework for sustainable development is to be reinforced it must begin with

1 Richard Samans, Klaus Schwab and Mark Malloch-Brown, "Everybody's Business: Strengthening International Cooperation in a More Interdependent World", 2010.

2 The Consultative Group of Ministers or High-Level Representatives on International Environmental Governance met in Nairobi from 7 to 9 July 2010 and in Espoo, Finland, from 21 to 23 November 2010. The outcome of its work, which was adopted by the Group at the Espoo meeting, is known as the Nairobi-Helsinki Outcome.

strengthening both the environmental pillar and the integration and coordination functions of overall governance for sustainable development. It concludes by offering recommendations that should be considered if progress is to be made in better integrating the environment pillar into the framework of sustainable development.

I. Consultative groups established by the Governing Council

7. By paragraph 1 of decision 25/4, the Governing Council established a regionally representative, consultative group of ministers or high-level representatives, inviting each United Nations region to propose between two and four Governments to participate, while remaining open to participation by other interested Governments.

8. The work of this group, which came to be known as the “Belgrade Process” in reference to the location of its first meeting, resulted in the identification of some objectives and functions of an international environmental governance system (see box) and the elaboration of a set of options for improving international environmental governance, which were presented to the Governing Council at its eleventh special session.

Belgrade Process: Key objectives and underlying functions

Creating a strong, credible and coherent science base

- Data and information collection, exchange and analysis
- Assessment, early warning and awareness raising
- Cross-sectoral data collection and research
- Science-policy interface

1. Developing a global authoritative and responsive voice for environmental sustainability.

- Global agenda setting and policy guidance
- Rulemaking, standard setting and development of universal principles
- Compliance, monitoring and accountability
- Dispute avoidance and settlement

2. Achieving coherence within the UN system.

- Coordination of policies and programmes
- Coherence among multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and rationalisation of MEA secretariat activities

3. Securing sufficient, predictable and coherent funding.

- Mobilising funds for the global environment
- Development of innovative market-based financing mechanisms
- Influencing priorities for financing environmental initiatives
- Linking the public and private sector

4. Ensuring a responsive and cohesive approach to meeting country needs.

- Human and institutional capacity building
- Technology transfer and financial support
- Linking international and local levels

5. Facilitating the transition towards a global green economy.

- *The functions for objectives 1-5 will collectively contribute towards achieving the objective of facilitating the transition towards a global green economy, for example through assessment, policy guidance, rulemaking, mobilizing funds etc.*

9. By its decision SS.XI/1, the Governing Council took note of the set of options and decided to establish a regionally representative, consultative group of ministers or high-level representatives and that the group would consider the broader reform of the international environmental governance system, building on the set of options, but remaining open to new ideas. It also decided that the group would conclude its work in a timely fashion and to present a final report to the Governing Council at its twenty-sixth session, in anticipation of the Council’s contribution in time for the second meeting of the open-ended preparatory committee of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and the sixty-fifth session of the United Nations General Assembly.

10. The Executive Director of UNEP, in his capacity as Chair of the Environment Management Group, was requested to invite the United Nations system to provide input to the group, and the consultative group, through the UNEP secretariat, was requested to seek relevant inputs from civil society groups from each region.

11. Having considered the objectives and functions of an international environmental governance system identified during the Belgrade Process, and after reviewing the gaps and options discussed in a document on elaboration of ideas on broader international environmental governance reform (UNEP/CGIEG.2/2/2), the Consultative Group identified a number of potential system-wide responses to the challenges in the current system of international environmental governance, including:

- (a) Improving the science-policy interface with the full and meaningful participation of developing countries;
- (b) Developing a system-wide strategy for environment in the United Nations system;
- (c) Encouraging synergies between compatible multilateral environmental agreements and identifying guiding elements for realizing such synergies;
- (d) Creating a stronger link between global environmental policy making and financing;
- (e) Developing a system-wide capacity-building framework for the environment;
- (f) Continuing to strengthen strategic engagement at the regional level.

12. Having identified the potential system-wide responses above, the Consultative Group considered institutional forms that would best serve to implement those responses and achieve the objectives and functions identified during the Belgrade Process.

13. Strengthening the global authoritative voice, as well as other voices, for the environment is a key outcome of the international environmental governance reform process, providing credible, coherent and effective leadership for environmental sustainability under the overall framework of sustainable development. During the Belgrade Process and in the Co-Chairs' document on elaboration of ideas for broader reform of international environmental governance (UNEP/CGIEG.2/2/2), various options for broader institutional reforms were put forward, including the following five options:

- (a) Enhancing UNEP;
- (b) Establishing a new umbrella organization for sustainable development;
- (c) Establishing a specialized agency such as a world environment organization;
- (d) Reforming the United Nations Economic and Social Council and the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development;
- (e) Enhancing institutional reforms and streamlining existing structures.

14. The Consultative Group recognized the need to develop all the options further and suggested that options (b) and (d) would best be addressed in the wider sustainable development context.

15. Based on the principle that form follows function, and recognizing that it had not achieved consensus on institutional form, the Group suggested that existing institutions should be strengthened and enhanced. It also considered that options (a) enhancing UNEP, (c) establishing a specialized agency such as a world environment organization, and (e) enhancing institutional reforms and streamlining existing structures were potential options for strengthening the form of the environment pillar in the context of sustainable development and achieving effective international environmental governance.

II. Institutional framework for sustainable development: the importance of the environment to the economic and social pillars

16. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, commonly referred to as the "Rio Conference" or "Earth Summit", was a major success in raising public awareness of the need to integrate environment and development. In the preparatory process for the Earth Summit, there were a number of proposals made for institutional reform to meet the challenges of sustainable development. The summit participants adopted crucial agreements, including the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21 and the landmark "Rio conventions" (the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). The participants also created new international institutions, including the Commission on Sustainable Development, which was tasked with the follow-up to the Earth Summit, and led to the reform of the Global Environment Facility. Ten years later, the concept of three mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development was incorporated

into the 2002 Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. This was also addressed in the 2005 World Summit Outcome.

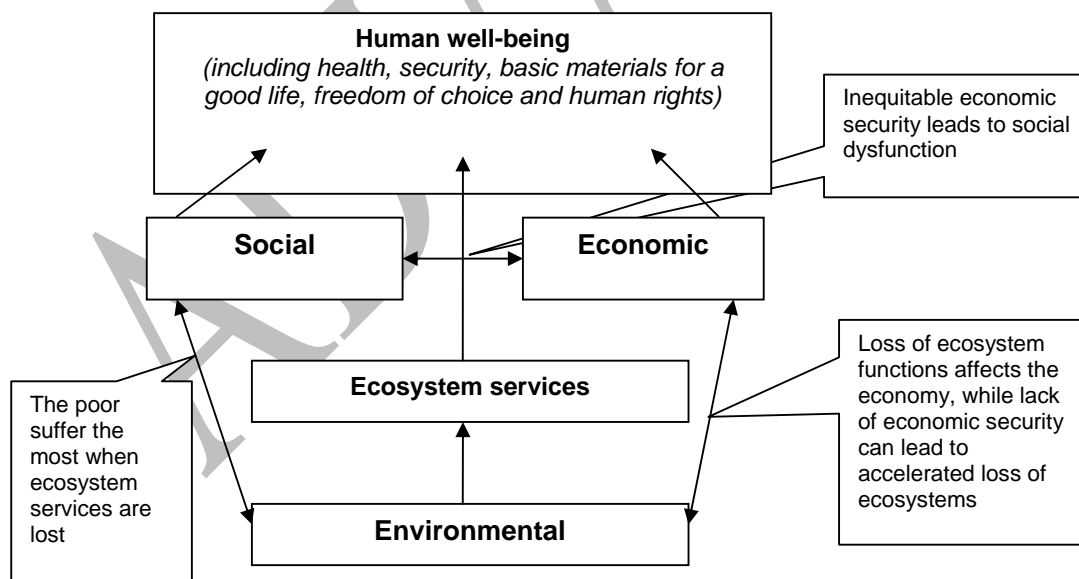
17. A guiding principle for discussions on the institutional framework for sustainable development is that form should follow function. Since there has been a broad agreement that there is insufficient integration among the three pillars of sustainable development, it follows that governance in all three pillars needs to be strengthened, better coordinated and more coherent. The environmental pillar, stated in the Secretary-General's report to the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development at its first session (A/CONF.216/PC/2) as being the weakest of the three pillars,³ needs to be strengthened in order to be able to improve human well-being, to contribute to economic growth and to increase social well-being.

18. While the idea of achieving sustainable development has been politically popular, and although there have been many efforts to define sustainable development, the world continues to lack coherent strategies for its implementation. Part of the reason for this is that a lack of clarity has enabled sustainable development to become a catch-all concept for special interest groups, resulting in an incoherent, sprawling and costly agenda.

19. This situation has done little to advance the sustainable development agenda and has detracted from the original premise that environmental sustainability, economic development and social welfare are complementary goals (see figure). Consequently, the importance of the environment to the other two pillars of sustainable development has yet to be sufficiently recognized in mainstream policymaking.

20. Environmental issues are intertwined with many economic development and social issues and are intricately interwoven with poverty. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment report shows that there is a direct relationship between the health of the environment (ecosystems) and economic and social welfare, establishing conclusively that efforts to alleviate poverty and improve human well-being will not succeed where environmental degradation is allowed to continue. Underlying all the resources that we use are ecosystem processes: the biological, chemical and physical interactions between the components of ecosystems (e.g., soil, water and species). These processes produce benefits to people (or ecosystem services) in the form of food, clean water, carbon sequestration and reductions in erosion, among others. In essence, the goods and services that drive our economies and support our social systems are derived largely from a healthy and functioning environment.

Links between the environment, economic development and social welfare



21. A stable environment, the fostering of economic and social development and the enhancement of human well-being (including security, the basic materials for a good life (for example, sufficient

³ See also the information note by the Executive Director, *Environment in the United Nations system*. UNEP, 7 June 2010. Available at www.unep.org/environmental-governance/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=tZyjX8cn738%3d&tabid=4556&language=en-US.

nutritious food), health and good social relations) are interlinked and inseparable, and prosperity and poverty reduction are dependent on the benefits coming from ecosystems.

22. Goods and services derived from the environment have contributed to substantial net gains in economic development, social welfare and human well-being overall. The report on the economics of ecosystems and biodiversity for national and international policymakers shows that the economic and social sectors are directly concerned with biodiversity and ecosystem services, including agriculture, fisheries, forestry, development, health, energy, transport and industry. Several sectors depend on natural capital for their flow of inputs, research, new products and business innovation. For example, 20–25 per cent of the pharmaceutical sector's turnover (some \$650 billion per year) is derived from genetic resources, and ecotourism generates around \$100 billion per year in employment. Overall, the report estimates that failure to halt biodiversity loss on land may cost \$500 billion by 2010, this being the estimated value of ecosystem services that would have been provided had biodiversity been maintained at 2000 levels. At sea, unsustainable fishing reduces potential fisheries output by an estimated \$50 billion per year.

23. These gains have been achieved at an ever-growing cost in the form of degradation of many ecosystem services, increased risk of non-linear changes and exacerbation of poverty for some groups.

III. Gaps in the current governance system

24. Continuing environmental degradation indicates that the current system of international environmental governance is inadequate to support Governments in preserving the environment for the social and economic well-being of their constituents. A number of basic challenges limit the effectiveness of the current international environmental governance system. They are described below.

A. Lack of an authoritative voice to guide environmental policy effectively at the global level

25. The most self-evident gap is the lack of a single authoritative and responsive voice for environmental sustainability at the international level. The system is fragmented, inefficient and characterized by a blurred division of labour and overlapping mandates. More than 40 United Nations agencies are dealing with aspects of environmental sustainability and multiple multilateral environmental agreements have been developed to govern various aspects of environmental change. No single institution or authority exists to provide global leadership in galvanizing political will, providing coherent policy guidance, framing international responses along the lines of the Millennium Development Goals and establishing a global monitoring and reporting framework. As countries do not receive the required support at the national level, there are alarming gaps in commitment and action.

B. Lack of coherence between global environmental policies and programmes

26. The current hierarchy of environmental decision-making at the international level is incoherent, leading to fragmentation, inefficiencies and overlaps. At the same time, coordination and coherence are essential to the smooth functioning of an international environmental governance system in view of the interdependent and intersectoral nature of global environmental systems. The coordination of the international environmental governance system will have implications for the distribution of data and information throughout the system, for the integration of policy responses and for the distribution of financial resources and the identification of country-driven priorities.

C. Weak science-policy interface for informed decision-making

27. The existing environmental knowledge infrastructure goes beyond UNEP and consists of a wide range of institutional components that supports various stages in the interaction between science and policymaking. It spans the global, regional, national and local levels and involves many entities from the United Nations system. The evolution of the knowledge infrastructure needs to keep pace with increasing environmental change and document how society interacts with the environment across geographic scales and boundaries, with particular attention paid to developing countries. A fundamental deficiency in the existing international science-policy infrastructure for environment is a prevalent lack of shared science, of common science and policy objectives, and of capacity in monitoring, data management, assessments and early warning systems, particularly in developing countries and regions.

D. High degree of financial fragmentation

28. The two issues concerning the financing mechanisms within the environmental sector are the dispersion of funds and the non-alignment of funds with those institutions whose mandates pertain primarily to environmental management. Most funds within the environmental sector are spread across the Global Environment Facility, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, with fewer resources administrated by other financial mechanisms, including the Multilateral Fund for the Implementation of the Montreal Protocol; several funds related to climate change adaptation and mitigation; the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management; and the Technical Cooperation Trust Fund of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal. All funds operate according to their own rules and regulations, based in different locations, with little to no coordination. This lack of coordination between mechanisms results in the duplication of activities, higher operational costs and inefficient use of resources.

E. Irrationality of multilateral environmental agreement governance and administration

29. Following a piecemeal approach to environmental management, today's international environmental governance system consists of a plethora of multilateral environment agreements, each dealing with individual environmental challenges. They are integral to establishing standards, guidelines, and policies for the stewardship of the global environment but, at the same time, the nature of their development has resulted in a complex and fragmented system with substantive and administrative overlaps.

F. Lack of a central monitoring, review and accountability system for commitments made under multilateral environmental agreements

30. Contrary to other global regimes, within the environmental field accountability for global commitments is not guaranteed. While Governments are willing to implement and comply with the commitments that they have made under the various multilateral environmental agreements, questions remain about the degree of implementation and, more specifically, about accountability, including accountability for funding and/or support for implementing commitments.

G. Implementation gap: insufficient response to countries' needs

31. Following the ratification of multilateral environmental agreements, many Governments face implementation challenges at the national level. This gap is generally the result of a lack of technical, human and financial resources, among others, and is particularly prevalent in developing countries, whose leaders argue that, the political will to implement their obligations under the multilateral environmental agreements notwithstanding, they lack the expertise, institutions, human and financial resources to do so.

32. The need for increased and tailored support to countries includes support for: carrying out scientific assessments and establishing a science-policy interface; implementing their obligations under the multilateral environmental agreements (from drafting necessary environmental laws to devising appropriate institutions and increasing human capacity to follow through); and linking environmental sustainability with developing strategies and plans. The current governance structure does not meet these needs sufficiently and as such institutional reforms are required.

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