

**UNEP, International Environmental Governance, and
the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda**

by

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Section 1. Overview of Global Environmental Governance Framework

In less than a decade, the playing field in which global environmental governance occurs has changed significantly. Among these changes are the creation of new institutional structures, the widespread adoption of strategic management practices, the development of new targets and indicators to gauge progress, the launch of an array of new efforts to realize synergies throughout the UN system, and new capabilities and approaches to cultivating knowledge. Rather than a completed project, these developments need to be seen as building the foundations for longer term improvements in the coherence and effectiveness of the international environmental governance system. As this paper describes, UNEP has played a major role in these developments.

Together these developments provide the basis for a transformative global environmental governance system that can effect tangible long term progress towards improving the environment worldwide. In many cases these developments have yet to realize their full potential. For that potential to be realized, a great deal of additional work is required for which UNEP's experience and expertise will enable it to play a leading role.

Among the institutional structures that have emerged are the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) both of which were provided for in the Rio + 20 outcome document, "The future we want" and subsequent General Assembly resolution. These developments were initiated by UN member states to provide the foundations for the ambitious post-2015 development agenda. The HLPF replaced the prior Commission for Sustainable Development and is tasked with monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (2030 Agenda) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). UNEA replaced the former UNEP governing body (the Governing Council) composed of 58 member states, with a new governing body with universal membership. Contemporaneous with these developments, UN member states have underlined and confirmed the role of UNEP as the leading global environmental authority that sets the international environmental agenda.

To support a larger strategic approach to managing global environmental institutions, UN member states have adopted a range of indicators and targets against which performance is monitored and assessed. Among these metrics, the SDGs are perhaps most visible. In contrast to the Millennium Development Goals, which had little direct relevance to the environmental sector, more than half of the SDGs address environmental concerns (89 out of 169 targets). In addition to providing strong commitments to the environment, the SDGs also have situated the environmental dimension of sustainable development in the context of a much broader set of issues. Similarly, among UN entities and multilateral environmental

agreements (MEAs) with strategic plans, indicator frameworks are increasingly used to measure results. In addition, the application of the targets and indicators among international environmental institutions is driving greater standardization and interoperability of data regarding environmental matters.

Similar trends are evident at the national level. Efforts by the UN Development Group to refine the Delivering as One framework to support the 2030 Agenda and SDGs implementation through the development of standard operating procedures are important new developments to fostering synergies among UN entities.

At the same time, these positive measures need to be viewed in the context of the grave state of the global environment. UNEP publications have consistently documented the deterioration of the global environment. It is difficult to know the counterfactual—what would have happened in the absence of existing international environmental governance institutions and law—but it is difficult to argue that results have been adequate. Should dramatic improvements in the effectiveness of international environmental governance and international environmental law not occur, within a few decades conditions may become irreparable across many different areas.

Against this backdrop, this paper will explore the role of UNEP/UNEA in international environmental governance at the global and national levels, giving particular attention to the 2030 Agenda. The issues and themes described in this report follow the developments in international environmental governance in the Rio + 20 outcome document and subsequent General Assembly resolution. This paper also benefited from the comments of expert participants in a workshop on “Achieving environmental sustainability for sustainable development” organized by UNEP on 21-22 July 2016 in New York. Following this overview, Section 2 continues at the global level and reviews the role of UNEP in the sustainable development agenda. In Section 3 it considers the role of UNEA/UNEP in the environmental governance landscape vis-a-vis other actors, and in Section 4 it examines opportunities and challenges in light of these different stakeholders. Next in Section 5 it will look into national level applications of these arrangements, particularly through pilots of the SDGs and examining the national level governance systems needed to deliver on the environmental dimension of the SDG. In Section 6, it will offer recommendations and suggestions on the future of global environmental governance and the role of UNEP/UNEA.

Section 2. UNEP's Role in Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals

The question of UNEP's role in the SDGs and 2030 Agenda is explored in a recent report of the UNEP Executive Director to UNEA. As noted above, more than half of the SDGs have an environmental dimension. At the same time, the SDGs cut across the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainable development. Hence, on one level it is necessary to distinguish the environmental dimension from the other dimensions of sustainable development, yet on another level there is a need to deal with the issues in a comprehensive fashion. From the standpoint of environmental law and policy this development is a double-edged sword. From one perspective, it will help facilitate the integration of environmental matters within these broader frameworks, while from another angle, it risks watering down the environmental concerns.

UNEP's long experience and expertise in environmental matters particularly in international environmental governance is a key comparative advantage that can support the process overall; however, efforts must be made to clarify the institutional boundaries and modalities for its work in the context of the integrated economic-social-environmental approach of the 2030 Agenda. Within this broad sustainable development context, UNEP can and should play a central role in contributing to the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda by supporting the HLPF and ensuring the coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, and inclusiveness of UN activities on the environment at the global and national levels.

The mandate for UNEP's role in the 2030 Agenda is elaborated in resolution 2/5 "Delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", adopted by the second session of UNEA in May 2016 and General Assembly resolution 71/231 adopted in December 2016, which set forth the UNEA relationship with the HLPF. Among matters identified, resolution 2/5 cites UNEP's role in coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development taking into account the recommendations of the HLPF, its role as secretariat of the Ten-year framework of programs on sustainable consumption and production patterns, fostering partnerships and other means of cooperation with UN bodies, and engaging with regional coordination mechanisms.

As recognized in the General Assembly Resolution, UNEP can act as a point of communication between the UN Environment Management Group and HLPF. UNEP can also help bring a unified voice on the environmental dimension of sustainable development to the HLPF. Such efforts have already begun through the submission of a detailed report to the HLPF on the outcomes from UNEA and UNEP's contribution to the 2030 Agenda, which will be repeated in 2017.

UNEP's role as chair of the Environment Management Group is also fostering coherence and effective cooperation by furthering implementation of environmental strategies, targets, and indicators adopted by the Environment Management Group members. The System-Wide Framework of Strategies on the Environment agreed upon by the Environment Management Group members, endorsed by the Chief Executives Board, and launched at UNEA, was designed to bring about the convergence of individual UN agencies' and MEAs' strategies for different environmental objectives while improving the ability of the UN system collectively to implement the 2030 Agenda. During the initial phase of implementation of the System-Wide Framework of Strategies, efforts were focused on gathering information, but over the coming years attention will shift towards reporting on activities.

Drawing upon experience from the alignment of strategies among the biodiversity-related conventions and the national biodiversity strategies and action plans with the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, UNEP can help foster coherence by aligning strategies among UN agencies and MEAs towards the 2030 Agenda. These efforts were made possible through a range of support including awareness raising, capacity building, knowledge development, and engagement. As described in Section 5 below, at the national level, UNEP could enhance the integration of environmental matters in the UN Development Assistance Frameworks, while identifying and fostering synergies between MEAs and other norms.

Likewise, UNEP can help align the array of different indicator frameworks employed currently by the Environment Management Group members with the indicators needed to support the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Initiatives such as the Global Biodiversity Indicator Partnership, developed with leadership from UNEP, can be expanded to support the need for data regarding matters cutting across other environmental sub-sectors such as air pollution, climate change, chemicals, land degradation, as well as other contexts where the environment intersects with other sectors such as health and human rights. UNEP can also identify and realize synergies between the observational and measurement infrastructures used by diverse actors in the environmental field. Through the assistance of UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre, initiatives such as the Group on Earth Observations Biodiversity Observation Network can be broadened to incorporate the observational needs of other environmental sub-sectors.

In addition, contemporaneously with the development of the SDGs, throughout the environmental governance system, new efforts are underway to identify and act upon linkages between the environmental agenda and other fields including, poverty reduction, human rights, rule of law, and democratic principles. The use of environmental impact assessment and strategic environmental assessment, which support participation and access to justice in

environmental matters, illustrate ways governance and environmental concerns can be simultaneously addressed.

Section 3. UNEA/UNEP's Role in Environmental Governance Landscape

The Rio + 20 outcome document, which called for the establishment of the HLPF, simultaneously emphasized and confirmed UNEP's central role in the environmental agenda. Paragraph 88 of the outcome document referred to UNEP as “the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda” and “promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system”. This affirmation of UNEP's critical role in safeguarding the global environment was further underscored by a reaffirmation of UNEP's mandate in General Assembly Resolution 2997 (XXVII). It is also reflected in UNEA resolution 2/5, “Delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

As described more fully below, consistent with these mandates, UNEP has played a significant role in driving and advancing environmental governance in the UN system. UNEP stands as both a coordinator of actors in the environmental sector but also relates the environmental agenda to the broader set of sustainable development priorities. This section reviews what responsibilities have been delegated and what progress has been made.

Governance

As a basis for supporting UNEP's strengthened role in international environmental governance, the member states took steps to enhance its governance. Paragraph 88(a) of the outcome document referred to the need to replace the UNEP Governing Council created by General Assembly resolution 2997 with a body having universal membership and undertake measures to strengthen its governance as well as its responsiveness and accountability to

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