

**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE HI-LEVEL
PANEL ON SYSTEM-WIDE COHERENCE ON
STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL
ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE**

Introduction by Mohamed El-Ashry

In less than fifteen years, the response of the international community to the challenges of environment and sustainable development included four international summits, four ministerial conferences, three international conventions, two protocols, and a new financial entity - the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

On the face of it, these are remarkable achievements. But in spite of the high-powered gatherings, agreements and commitments, little progress has been achieved in improving the environment and in pursuing sustainable development. Global environmental trends continue to be negative and the promise of significant financial resources to address the challenges of environment and development has not materialized. Ninety million people are added to our global village every year, mostly in developing countries; one person in three still lacks adequate freshwater; greenhouse gases are steadily increasing; ecosystems that are critical for human survival continue to be undermined; and land degradation threatens food security and livelihoods, especially in Africa. It is ironic that as the evidence for environmental degradation becomes more convincing, the political will for action becomes weaker or lacking.

There are many reasons for such lack of progress, key among them is a weak and fragmented international environmental governance. Governance is about how decisions are being made, who is responsible, how they carry out their mandate, and how they are accountable. The international system is complex, fraught with duplication, and lacks coordination.

The inadequacy of the current system is the result of having outgrown its original design. There are more than 600 multilateral environmental agreements, many with their own governing bodies and secretariats. Many of these agreements focus on a single issue, like climate change or trade in endangered species, and few of them contain specific targets, timetables, or provisions for adequate enforcement. Financing for implementation is awfully inadequate and developing countries are unable to cope with the extensive reporting and participation requirements.

Similarly, the array of institutions dealing with environmental issues is bewildering. As environmental issues have become more clearly defined and interlinked, they have come to influence the work of practically every UN organization, all competing for the same limited resources. In addition, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN's principal environmental organization and the focal point for system-wide coordination, is considered weak, under-funded, and ineffective in its core functions.

The institutional quandary is further complicated by the fact that the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) has been ineffective in fulfilling its mandate and ensuring that the promise of integrating environment and development is achieved. The Commission's work in the last decade has been broadened considerably to include sectoral assessments of natural resources and the environment. By focusing on environmental issues alone, it has contributed to duplication and often unclear divisions of labor. In addition, the World Bank and other multilateral development institutions play a significant role in implementing policies and projects related to the environment, with little or no coordination with the rest of the UN system. This does not mean, however, that there should be only one international organization for the environment. Mainstreaming the environment in the operations of the World Bank, the Regional Development Banks, or UNDP, for example, is our hope for achieving real sustainable development.

In order to deliver on the internationally agreed goals and commitments, the UN will require stronger leadership and greater capacity for the environment. It is in the international community's interest to have institutions that can respond effectively to the threats of environmental degradation. In this regard, UNEP is the right organization to set global standards and to coordinate system-wide environmental activities. It should be strengthened with a renewed mandate and improved funding, with broad oversight for international environmental governance.

Similarly, to address duplication and inefficiency in the international system, the environmental roles and mandates of its component institutions, including UNEP, should be clarified. While partnerships, coordination and collaboration should be emphasized, a greater specialization with lead responsibilities, based on comparative advantage, should be assigned to one institution.

If this were to occur, a strengthened UNEP would assume the lead role in monitoring and assessing the state of the world environment and in identifying gaps and challenges. There is also great necessity for good science and authoritative decision-making. Major environmental actions are being challenged because of the perceived high costs compared to benefits. UNEP would also have the lead in efforts to strengthen environment ministries and scientific capacity in developing countries, and in the wide dissemination of information on best practices.

To that end, in its report to the Secretary-General, the High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment, made a number of recommendations for strengthening international environmental governance and for making it more coherent and effective. Taken together and implemented, the recommendations will result in a stronger and more viable system, one that is fit to address today's as well as tomorrow's global environmental challenges.

UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S HI-LEVEL PANEL ON SYSTEM-WIDE COHERENCE IN THE AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT, HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND THE ENVIRONMENT¹

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C. Environment: building a global consensus and capacity for action

Deteriorating environmental trends have far-reaching economic, social and health implications and affect the world's ability to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Substantial gains in efficiency and effective responses can be made through enhanced coordination and improved normative and operational capacity,

in particular through the integration of environment into national development strategies and United Nations system country operations. To improve effectiveness and targeted action of environmental activities, the system of international environmental governance should be strengthened and more coherent, featuring an upgraded UNEP with real authority as the United Nations environment policy pillar. Synergy needs to be pursued between the United Nations organizations that address environment, and multilateral environmental agreements should continue to pursue efficiencies and coordination among themselves. An independent assessment of the current United Nations system of international environmental governance is required to support ongoing efforts at reform.

30. There can be no long-term development without environmental care. In a global and interdependent world economic objectives and environmental objectives increasingly reinforce each other. Environmental priorities — including climate change — have too often been compartmentalized and separated from economic development priorities. However, because the impacts are global and felt disproportionately by the poor, environmental sustainability is not an option — it is an imperative. The Panel is united in its conviction that addressing worsening trends of environmental degradation is one of the greatest collective challenges for economic development and human welfare.

31. We possess fairly comprehensive knowledge and understanding of what we individually and collectively need to do to reverse these trends — all spelled out in reports, declarations, treaties and summits since the early 1970s. While we have made significant advances within the United Nations framework, what is needed now is a substantially strengthened and streamlined international environmental governance structure, to support the incentives for change required at all levels.

32. The Panel recognizes that relatively little headway has been made in integrating the environment in development strategies at the country level, or in implementing internationally agreed goals. Environmental issues and goals must now be better integrated within United Nations system country operations, as critical components of national poverty reduction strategies and sustainable development plans. Bearing in mind that environmental sustainability is the foundation for achieving all the other Millennium Development Goals, there must be a strengthening of human, technical and financial capacities in developing countries to mainstream

environmental issues in national decision-making, particularly through the resident coordinator.

33. The increase in the incidence and severity of natural disasters with environmental causes demonstrates the need to strengthen the links between environmental and humanitarian activities and between environmental and development activities. The United Nations system needs to incorporate more knowledge in its work on preparedness and risk reduction for natural disasters and for post-disaster recovery and reconstruction.

34. The United Nations institutions for the environment must be optimally organized and tooled, drawing on expertise in different parts of the United Nations system. Unless the United Nations adopts more comprehensive approaches, it will continue to fall short of its goals. The Panel is cognizant of the ongoing General Assembly informal consultative process on international environmental governance and has interacted with the process. Our recommendations should give it greater impetus.

35. Fragmented institutional structures do not offer an operational framework to address global issues, including water and energy. Water is an essential element in the lives of people and societies, and the lack of access to water for basic needs inflicts hardship on more than 1 billion people. Similarly, energy is a main driver of development, but current systems of energy supply and use are not sustainable (more than 2 billion people in developing countries do not have access to modern energy services). More than 20 United Nations organizations are engaged at some level in water and energy work, but there is little evidence of overall impact.

36. The inadequacy of the current system is the result of having outgrown its original design. Developing countries are unable to cope with the extensive reporting and participation requirements of the current multilateral environmental structure, which has depleted expertise and resources for implementation. A survey by the Panel revealed that the three Rio Conventions (biodiversity, climate and desertification) have up to 230 meeting days annually. Add the figures for seven other major global environmental agreements (not including regional agreements) and that number rises to almost 400 days.

37. As environmental issues have become more clearly defined and interlinked, they have come to influence the work of practically every United Nations organization, all competing for the same

limited resources. The institutional complexity is further complicated by the substantial environment portfolios of the World Bank and regional development banks, which are not well coordinated with the rest of the United Nations system. In addition, UNEP, the principal environment organization of the United Nations — with its normative, scientific, analytical and coordinating mandate — is considered weak, under-funded and ineffective in its core functions.

38. Climate change, desertification, ecosystem decline, and dispersion of hazardous chemical substances have the potential to affect every part of the globe and require clear and forceful responses by the United Nations system. Cooperation should be close among UNEP, UNDP, WMO, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the World Bank for building scientific and technical capacity, managing investment and infrastructure components, supporting adaptation measures and facilitating an effective integration of global environmental concerns into the development policy frameworks at the country level. GEF, the specialized funding instrument to help developing countries undertake projects and programmes that protect the global environment, has been replenished in 2006 — but will require a significant increase in resources to address future challenges. Its policy requirements and operational procedures need to be made much more simple and compatible with the development framework at the country level.

39. It is the judgement of the Panel that the international community must transcend differences and move forward. Economic growth, social justice and environmental care, advance best when they advance together. It is in our shared interest to have institutions that enable us to respond collectively to the threats of environmental degradation that challenge us all. To deliver on the internationally agreed goals and commitments, the United Nations will require stronger leadership and greater capacity for environmental activities. In this regard, cooperation and partnerships with civil society organizations, including the private sector, are essential.

Recommendation: International environmental governance should be strengthened and more coherent in order to improve effectiveness and targeted action of environmental activities in the United Nations system. It should be strengthened by upgrading UNEP with a renewed mandate and improved funding.

Recommendation: An upgraded UNEP should have real authority as the environment policy pillar of the United Nations system, backed by normative and analytical capacity and with broad responsibility to review progress towards improving the global environment. UNEP should provide substantive leadership and guidance on environmental issues.

- The technical and scientific capacity of UNEP should be strengthened as the environmental early-warning mechanism of the international community and for monitoring, assessing and reporting on the state of the global environment. This can be achieved through a system of networking and drawing on the work of existing bodies, including academic institutions and centres of excellence and the scientific competence of relevant specialized agencies and scientific subsidiary bodies of multilateral environmental agreements.
- Capacity should be built to promote the implementation of international commitments. The Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building should be strategically implemented to provide cutting-edge expertise and knowledge resources for the sustained expansion of capacity at the country level. Where necessary, UNEP should participate in United Nations country teams through the resident coordinator system, as part of One United Nations at the country level.
- UNEP should take the lead in assisting countries in the two-step process of quantifying environmental costs and benefits and incorporating them into mainstream policymaking, in cooperation with UNDP and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat.

Recommendation: United Nations agencies, programmes and funds with responsibilities in the area of the environment should cooperate more effectively on a thematic basis and through partnerships with a dedicated agency at the centre (such as air and water pollution, forests, water scarcity, access to energy and renewable energy). This would be based on a combined effort towards agreed common activities and policy objectives to eliminate duplication and focus on results.

- Greater coordination at Headquarters should promote coherence at the country level, and greater coordination efforts at the country level should promote coherence at the international level. There is a need to strengthen UNEP

coordination of system-wide environmental policies in order to improve cohesion and consistency. In this regard, the Environmental Management Group should be given a clearer mandate and be better utilized. It should be linked with the broader framework of sustainable development coordination.

Recommendation: Efficiencies and substantive coordination should be pursued by diverse treaty bodies to support effective implementation of major multilateral environmental agreements. Such coordination is being pursued by the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm convention secretariats (pending decisions of their respective conferences of the parties).

- Stronger efforts should be made to reduce costs and reporting burdens and to streamline implementation. National reporting requirements for related multilateral environmental agreements should be consolidated into one comprehensive annual report, to ease the burden on countries and improve coherence.
- Countries should consider integrating implementation needs of multilateral environmental agreements into their national sustainable development strategies, as part of the One Country Programme.
- Governing bodies of multilateral environmental agreements should promote administrative efficiencies, reducing the frequency and duration of meetings, moving to joint administrative functions, convening back-to-back or joint meetings of bureaux of related conventions, rationalizing knowledge management and developing a consistent methodological approach to enable measurement of enforcement and compliance.

Recommendation: GEF should be strengthened as the major financial mechanism for the global environment. Its contribution in assisting developing countries in implementing the conventions and in building their capacities should be clarified, in conjunction with its implementing and executing agencies. A significant increase in resources will be required to address future challenges effectively.

Recommendation: The Secretary-General should commission an independent and authoritative assessment of the current United Nations system of international environmental

governance. To be completed as soon as possible and taking previous work into account, the assessment would review global needs as well as the specific roles and mandates of UNEP and other United Nations agencies and multilateral environmental agreements. It would provide the basis for further reforms towards improving system-wide coherence, effectiveness and targeted action. It should be complementary to the General Assembly informal consultative process on the institutional framework for the United Nations environmental activities, which should continue its work and provide guidance on the subject. The assessment should include an analysis of proposals to upgrade UNEP from among a range of organizational models.

¹ The Panel consisted of the following members: Shaukat Aziz (Co-Chair), Gordon Brown, Luisa Dias Diogo (Co-Chair), Mohamed El-Ashry, Robert Greenhill, Ruth Jacoby, Ricardo Lagos Escobar, Louis Michel, Benjamin W. Mkapa, Jean-Michel Severino, Josette S. Shiner, Jens Stoltenberg, and Keizo Takemi