

Recommendations on UN environment and sustainable development reform

Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)

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People rely on water, land, energy, biodiversity, and healthy ecosystems to sustain their livelihoods and natural resources are particularly critical to escaping poverty. While problems like climate change were once allocated to the environmental sector, the now broadening impact of natural disasters has put climate change and related environmental issues at the centre of the development debate.

Environmental sustainability should be a central component of the UN's development work, but the reality is that environment and development are often tackled separately. The concept of sustainable development was introduced to bring together environment, social, and economic issues. The UN should continue in its efforts to interlace these disparate elements while ensuring that the environmental sphere is independently strengthened.

The UN system is not currently equipped to implement the many commitments on environment and sustainable development that governments have agreed to over several decades. By some estimates, there are over 500 multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and about 42 UN bodies that deal with environmental issues in some manner. The sheer number of MEAs is a challenge, as is the fragmentation of the international environmental governance system, the lack of cooperation and enforcement, and the inefficient use of resources.

In November 2006, the UN Secretary-General's System Wide Coherence (SWC) Panel released recommendations on a number of areas for UN reform, including on environment and sustainable development. These recommendations direct the UN system to:

- Strengthen the International Environmental Governance system
- Upgrade UNEP with a renewed mandate, improved funding, and authority as "environmental policy pillar" of UN system
- Improve cooperation between UN agencies, programs and funds with responsibilities in environment
- Improve efficiency between treaty bodies
- Strengthen the Global Environment Facility as major financial mechanism for global environment
- Commission an independent assessment of International Environmental Governance
- Create a stronger partnership between UNEP and UNDP
- Mainstream sustainable development into ECOSOC
- Establish a UN Sustainable Development Board

While these recommendations would move the UN in the right direction in the areas of environment and sustainable development, they do not go far enough. As governments consider the Panel's recommendations in 2007, they should enhance implementation of the recommendations with the following measures:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Instill the UN's environmental agenda with the sense of urgency that these issues deserve, by committing adequate resources***

The Panel report's overall approach on environmental issues is cautious, whereas the time for bold and innovative actions on international environmental governance is well overdue. In addition to setting aggressive policies, the UN should contribute to a wider understanding of this urgency by expanding its role in popularizing environmental issues and educating the public. Committing adequate resources to tackle urgent environmental problems is imperative.
- 2. Establish sustainable development as the UN's overarching development framework, including implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)***

While the panel's recommendations make some headway on centralizing sustainable development as the UN's primary development framework, through a UN Sustainable Development Board under ECOSOC, the suggested structures may not be sufficient for ensuring that sustainable development is the overall approach. Governments should call for stronger measures to install sustainable development as the UN's conceptual and practical development agenda.
- 3. Expand UNEP's mandate to the level of the World Trade Organization (WTO)***

Environmental policies and programs are often trumped by trade priorities that have the legal and political backing of the WTO. In order to have equivalent clout, environmental priorities need to be backed by a global institution with a comparable level of influence. Governments must provide sufficient funding to ensure UNEP's mandate is expanded.
- 4. Implement existing recommendations related to International Environmental Governance now, rather than commissioning an additional assessment***

A plethora of consultations and reports on International Environmental Governance have already been commissioned and are ready to be considered for implementation, including assessments through the Cartagena process and by IISD, among many others. Time and resources should not be wasted on additional assessments.
- 5. Ensure that UNEP plays a leading role in the UN Development Group (UNDG), in UN country teams directed by UNDP, and in the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF)***

At the global level, the Environmental Management Group has been sidelined and ineffective in moving the poverty-environment agenda forward. Instead, UNEP should play a leading role in the UNGD. At the country level, UNEP should collaborate closely with UNDP and provide technical and normative expertise as part of UN country teams and through UNDAF.

6. ***Ensure that UN country programs incorporate robust measures on environmental sustainability***
UN country programs should be assessed regularly against environmental sustainability mandates and indicators, and adapted accordingly. UNEP should have the authority to assess the environmental sustainability of trade-driven development initiatives. To facilitate a shift toward implementing environmental policies in developing countries, more emphasis should be placed on building policy development and implementation capacities, rather than building negotiating capacities.
7. ***Integrate a gender perspective in UNDP-UNEP initiatives at the country level, including through poverty-environment initiatives, MDGs, and UNDAF***
All of the major UN global agreements signal that gender equity and equality are a prerequisite to sustainable development. As with environment, gender should be a cross-cutting issue in all development work. Thus, poverty-environment and UNDAF initiatives at the country level should integrate a gender perspective from the outset, in collaboration with relevant UN, government, and civil society bodies with gender expertise.
8. ***Revamp the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to focus on implementation, and replicate the CSD Major Groups model for stakeholder participation throughout the UN system***
While the current 2-year policy and review cycle at CSD is meant to catalyze implementation, in reality meetings of the Commission are largely devoid of intergovernmental cooperation on implementation and CSD decisions do not have leverage within ECOSOC. The CSD model for stakeholder participation has been successful and should be improved upon and replicated in other UN bodies.

References

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6. UNDP and UNEP, “Memorandum of Understanding between UNDP and UNEP,” November 2004.

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