



## **High-level Forum of the United Nations Environment Management Group**

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**United Nations Environment Management Group  
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### **Issues note by the Chair of the Environment Management Group**

The present issues note has been prepared by the Chair of the Environment Management Group and is intended to help focus and stimulate debate on key issues and questions which need to be addressed in the ongoing United Nations system-wide reform efforts in the field of environment.

The note includes and expands on key issues and questions raised in an earlier issues note circulated by the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Environment in connection with an "Environment Consultation" held by that Panel in Nairobi on 5 May 2006.

Members of the Environment Management Group are encouraged to propose additional key issues and questions to be addressed and to help develop appropriate responses and options which can be used as the basis for a Group contribution to the United Nations reform process.

## **I. The United Nations reform process and environment**

1. At the 2005 World Summit, global leaders agreed on the need for renewed United Nations reform efforts to achieve greater system-wide coherence across the various United Nations agencies, funds and programmes. They specifically asked the United Nations Secretary-General to strengthen the management and coordination of United Nations operational activities, giving priority to maximizing the United Nations contribution to achieving internationally agreed development goals such as the Millennium Development Goals and to improving United Nations effectiveness, coherence and performance in the three key areas of development, environment and humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup>

2. In addition to being one of three key priorities and pillars for the United Nations reform process, environment, along with economic growth and the equitable sharing of its benefits, is one of three key requirements for ensuring that all development is sustainable. The combination of and linkages among all three are critical. Without greater equity in sharing the benefits of development, rising poverty and population pressure on the resource base will escalate and undermine the possibilities for further economic growth. Without economic growth there will be limited or no benefits to share and poverty and poverty-driven environmental degradation will accelerate. Without environmental protection and improvement measures, economic growth with poverty reduction and other key economic and social development programmes cannot be sustained.

3. In response to the appeal at the 2005 World Summit, the renewed reform efforts for greater policy and operational coherence in the United Nations system will have a greater chance of success by focusing on these goals as a single and integrated agenda for action. None of the three goals is achievable without the other two: economic growth is not sustainable without protecting the environment and resource base on which future development depends; environment and social improvement programmes are not feasible without the financial resources generated by economic growth; and, most importantly, economic and environmental sustainability are not achievable without significant improvements in the lives and livelihoods of the poor majority of people.

4. Throughout the United Nations system, largely separate policies and programmes for economic development, social progress and environmental improvement need to be increasingly integrated in a single and coherent system-wide agenda and strategy for sustainable development. Despite previous reform efforts, at present the development policies for economic recovery and growth, the humanitarian programmes for improving health and living conditions and the action plans for environmental protection and improvement are still too often conceived and implemented separately. The failure to link and integrate these crucial policies and programmes undermines the chances of achieving long- and even short-term goals for any of them.

## **II. Integrating environment in United Nations development policy and decision-making**

5. The 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, criticized the conventional environment agenda for four main limitations: it tends to focus action on the effects of environmental problems rather than on their causes through largely react-and-cure rather than anticipate-and-prevent strategies; it tends to examine key issues as environmental issues alone rather than as development issues or joint environment-and-development issues; it tends to examine each critical issue in isolation rather than as a part of interlinked policy challenges; and it tends to take a narrow view of environmental policy as essentially an "add-on" to other policy fields. Some aspects of the conventional environment agenda and its limitations still persist today in the policies and approaches of key national and international agencies.

6. As there was at the time *Our Common Future* was published, there is at present a need to shift the focus from the effects of environmental problems to their policy causes by making key economic and sectoral agencies in national Governments and the United Nations system

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1 2005 World Summit Outcome (General Assembly resolution 60/1 of 16 September 2005).

"directly responsible and fully accountable for ensuring that their policies, programmes and budgets support development that is ecologically as well as economically sustainable".<sup>2</sup> In a recent statement, James MacNeill, former Secretary-General of the World Commission on Environment and Development and principal author of "Our Common Future", bluntly called this "the forgotten imperative of sustainable development":

"We have failed dismally in our attempts 'to merge environment with economics in our processes of decision-making'.... This in some ways is the most important imperative of all. If we change the way we make decisions, we will change the decisions we make: if we don't, we won't. One of the key assumptions underlying "Our Common Future" was that we could and would change the way we make decisions .... All we have to do to destroy our habitat on this green Earth is to continue what we are now doing. It is no exaggeration to say that the negotiations launched in December [on the Kyoto Protocol] are the most fateful in the history of our short stay on this planet. They will call for unprecedented foresight and courage on the part of our leaders, not to mention new and innovative forms of diplomacy."<sup>3</sup>

7. In all key development and environment agencies, the new sustainable development agenda also needs to be anchored and reinforced by incorporating impact assessments as an integral part of policy and decision-making in at least three key respects:

- (a) Assessing the likely environmental impacts of economic policies and activities;
- (b) Assessing the likely economic impacts of environmental policies and measures;
- (c) Assessing the likely equity impacts of both economic and environmental policies.

8. Integrating simultaneous economic, environmental and equity impact assessments into decision-making in key policy sectors will not make decision-making easier; indeed, it will inevitably increase rather than reduce the number and complexity of the trade-offs involved in major decisions. It will, however, significantly improve the chances of making better decisions. Making such trade-offs more explicit will compel decision makers to assess their policy options and defend their policy choices in terms of their economic, social and environmental sustainability.

9. In the issues note that it prepared for the Environment Consultation referred to above, the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence highlighted the "need for better integration of the environment perspective within the broad principle of sustainable development in [United Nations] country-level activities". As reflected in that earlier issues note, key questions include:<sup>4</sup>

- (a) What is the best way to manage environment in the United Nations system country operations?
- (b) How can linkages between normative and operational activities within the United Nations be strengthened?
- (c) How can the role of the United Nations Resident Coordinator and the participation of non-resident agencies be enhanced?
- (d) What are the challenges and constraints regarding the mainstreaming of environment in development decision-making?
- (e) What best practices exist for integrating environment into development at the country level and how can the United Nations system build on such practices?

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<sup>2</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 314.

<sup>3</sup> MacNeill, Jim, "The Forgotten Imperative of Sustainable Development", statement on receiving the 2006 Elizabeth Haub Prize for Environmental Diplomacy at the School of Law at Pace University on 20 April 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Secretary-General's High Level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Environment, Environment Consultation, Nairobi, 5 May 2006, Issues note, p. 5.

### III. Achieving United Nations system-wide coherence on environmental policy

10. A United Nations system-wide commitment to integrate simultaneous economic, environmental and equity impact assessments in all major policy and decision-making processes would ensure a more consistent, coherent and effective implementation of the sustainable development agenda. But to reinforce that common agenda, special consideration should be given in the renewed United Nations reform efforts to developing a United Nations system-wide environmental policy.

11. As the leadership needed for such a policy needs to be exercised at the highest levels, Governments would need to be involved, through the United Nations General Assembly, as would the heads of all key United Nations agencies, through the Chief Executives Board (CEB). Key questions include:

- (a) Can United Nations system-wide coherence on environmental policy be achieved in the absence of a system-wide policy on environment?
- (b) What could be the main elements of a system-wide policy on environment?
- (c) How could a system-wide policy on environment be developed and approved?
- (d) How could a system-wide policy on environment be implemented and monitored?
- (e) How could policy advice and guidance on new and emerging environmental issues be improved?

### IV. Strengthening the United Nations institutional framework on environment

12. Following the pioneering 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the United Nations General Assembly established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and entrusted it with key responsibilities for keeping under review the world environmental situation, for promoting the contribution of relevant international scientific and other professional communities, for providing policy guidance for the direction and coordination of environmental programmes in the United Nations system and for promoting international cooperation in the environment field.<sup>5</sup>

13. UNEP and its United Nations partners largely succeeded in promoting the expansion of environmental programmes within and outside the United Nations system. In the early 1970s, environmental issues were largely neglected or marginalized in many key agencies but today feature prominently in their programmes and budgets. Moreover, many of those agencies are now much larger, better financed and politically more powerful than UNEP. However, the proliferation of environmental programmes too often led to fragmentation and duplication of environmental activities. It also too often resulted in competition rather than cooperation, which made coordination even more important but also far more difficult.

14. In its issues note, the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel frankly stated that "the current system is characterized by fragmentation and a lack of coherence, including between the normative and operational aspects, hampering effectiveness and efficiency" and then posed the following four questions, among others:<sup>6</sup>

- (a) "What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current institutional framework within which normative and analytical aspects of the [United Nations'] work in the field of environment are undertaken, including with regard to work undertaken under the auspices of multilateral environmental agreements?"
- (b) How could the [United Nations] develop a stronger scientific and analytical capacity in monitoring, assessing and reporting on critical environmental trends?

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5 General Assembly resolution XXVII/2997.

6 Note 4, *supra*, at 4–5.

(c) How could the [United Nations] system ensure that global issues are adequately and adeptly addressed by the [United Nations] system (i.e. climate change)?

(d) What could constitute an effective institutional framework for the [United Nations] system's environmental activities, at the country, regional and global levels?"

15. Other relevant questions include:

(a) How can overlap and duplication be reduced and respective roles, responsibilities and reporting of key environmental programmes in the United Nations system be rationalized;

(b) How can more effective United Nations leadership, accountability and performance on tackling key environmental issues be ensured;

(c) How can largely independent agencies which have their own intergovernmental bodies and budgets be coordinated without in the absence of either a carrot or a stick.

## V. Reinforcing the United Nations and the international legal framework on environment

16. Over the last three decades, the international community has been particularly successful in negotiating and adopting many new multilateral environmental agreements. The Register of International Treaties and Other Agreements in the Field of the Environment<sup>7</sup>, compiled by UNEP in 2005, lists over 600 such agreements, dealing with a wide range of environmental issues related to water (197), chemicals and hazardous substances and wastes (179), biodiversity (155), atmosphere (61) and land (46).

17. While dramatically strengthening the international legal framework on environment, the rapid increase of these agreements has also overstretched the limited legal, institutional and financial capacity of developing countries to participate in and implement many of them. Also, after years of often intense negotiations involving hundreds of diplomats and experts from the majority of United Nations members, the effectiveness of some key agreements has been undermined by one or a few developed countries who have the capacity but lack the political will to honour and implement them.

18. As highlighted in the High-Level Panel's issues note referred to above<sup>8</sup>, the large number of multilateral environmental agreements has created new problems in the United Nations system, such as an overlap in scientific research and expertise, duplication in environmental activities, competition for scarce financial resources and a lack of policy integration at the nation, regional and global levels. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that key agreements are largely autonomous, with their own governing bodies and budgets (e.g., climate change, desertification, biodiversity) or are completely independent (e.g. wetlands, mountains).

19. Key questions include:

(a) Is it institutionally and financially viable to have so many multilateral environmental agreements that are largely autonomous entities?

(b) How could the United Nations best provide more comprehensive and coherent management and monitoring of the implementation of the growing range of multilateral environmental agreements?

(c) How can compliance with and implementation of multilateral environmental agreements be improved?

(d) Once ratified by an agreed number and combination of United Nations members, should key multilateral environmental agreements serving the long-term interests of all United Nations members and future generations become binding on all United Nations members?

<sup>7</sup> UNEP/Env.Law/2005/3.

<sup>8</sup> Note 4, *supra*, at 3–5.

## VI. Improving United Nations assessment and reporting on environmental issues and trends

20. A recent evaluation concluded:

"UNEP's assessments are highly recognized and have served not only as tools for environmental information but also as tools for capacity-building within collaborating centres around the world. In order to serve as the anchor institution for the environment in monitoring and assessment, however, UNEP will need to focus more resources into addressing several key challenges. Data comparability, information quality and coherence, and UNEP's internal capacity need to be enhanced along with the capacity for data collection and analysis in the developing world."<sup>9</sup>

21. In addition to the increasingly comprehensive Global Environment Outlook, UNEP and many other United Nations agencies produce a wide range of sectoral and geographic assessment reports and also support a global network of scientific data centres and collaborate on other joint global and regional assessment reports in such key areas as water. There is a need, however, for a coherent international system for environmental information and assessment as the duplication of environmental assessments conducted by UN agencies and NGOs "runs rampant. Stakeholders recognize this as a serious problem yet little is done to address the reasons for the failure to effectively coordinate activities or to formulate concrete strategies to overcome existing constraints."<sup>10</sup>

22. Key questions include:

(a) How can data collection, assessment and reporting on environmental issues and trends in the United Nations system be improved and harmonized?

(b) How data collection, assessment and reporting on environmental issues and trends outside the United Nations system be improved and harmonized?

(c) How can data collection, assessment and reporting on environmental issues and trends at the country level be improved and harmonized?

(d) What are the important information gaps at each level from national to global, and how can they be filled?

## VII. Expanding United Nations inter-agency cooperation on environment

23. In his 2005 report, "In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all", the United Nations Secretary General concluded:

"It is now high time to consider a more integrated structure for environmental standard-setting, scientific discussion and monitoring treaty compliance. This should be built on existing institutions, such as the United Nations Environment Programme, as well as the treaty bodies and specialized agencies."<sup>11</sup>

24. A recent report on global environmental governance, however, cited "incoherence, inefficiency, information inadequacy, inequity and insufficient funding" as five key problems in the United Nations system and concluded that while "radical reform may indeed be urgently needed to address these key problems", "it seems unlikely to transpire" as "political emphasis is increasingly being placed on working within existing institutions rather than attempting bold new designs."<sup>12</sup>

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9 Ivanova, Maria, *Can the Anchor Hold? Rethinking the United Nations Environment Programme for the 21st Century*, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, p. 16 (available online at [http://environment.yale.edu/documents/downloads/o-u/report\\_7\\_unep\\_evaluation.pdf](http://environment.yale.edu/documents/downloads/o-u/report_7_unep_evaluation.pdf)).

10 Ibid, at 18.

11 A/59/2005, para. 212.

12 Note 9, *supra*, at 39.

25. The many existing United Nations institutions dealing with environmental issues clearly face many new challenges to prove and improve their worth by undertaking their own bold measures to achieve greater policy coherence and operational performance together as part of a more integrated and effective United Nations system. One of the first steps could be to move from the previous emphasis on coordination toward far greater operational cooperation on environment issues from the global level to the country level.

26. Another major step will be to accelerate the strengthening of the role, functions and financing of the key inter-agency body on environmental issues, the United Nations Environment Management Group. For example, the effectiveness of the Group's predecessors was often constrained by low-level of participation; one bold innovation, therefore, could be for the heads of United Nations agencies who sit on the Chief Executives Board to convene a special session at which they would sit as the Environment Management Group to review and assess system-wide coherence on environmental policy and to address new and emerging priority issues on environment.

27. Key questions include:

- (a) How can cooperation on United Nations system-wide environmental goals at the global level be expanded?
- (b) How can cooperation on system-wide environmental goals at the regional level be expanded?
- (c) How can cooperation on system-wide environmental goals at the country level be expanded?
- (d) How can adequate and reliable financial support for Environment Management Group staffing and activities be ensured?

## VIII. Concluding note on the way forward

28. To be effective, the overall United Nations reform efforts to achieve greater policy coherence and operational effectiveness in the United Nations system need to be initiated and driven from the top, both politically by the United Nations Member States through the General Assembly and managerially by the heads of all key United Nations bodies and agencies through the Chief Executives Board. That high-level reform process is now well underway.

29. On environment, however, links to the top United Nations political and managerial bodies have historically been weak or missing. The new reform process recognizes the need to remedy that weakness by focusing on environment as one of the three key priority areas and pillars for improving United Nations effectiveness, coherence and performance.

30. As part of the renewed reform process, the Environment Management Group can and must play a major role in providing leadership, advice and assistance in, for example, at least two critical policy areas identified earlier in the present note: ensuring greater United Nations policy coherence by developing and implementing a system-wide policy on environment; and ensuring greater United Nations effectiveness and performance by focusing on "the forgotten imperative for sustainable development" and integrating environment in decision-making at all levels throughout the United Nations system. As both policy issues need and deserve high-level attention, they could both be addressed at a special session during the biannual meetings of the Chief Executives Board which, to highlight and reinforce the high-level attention and link on environment, could meet in special session as the Environment Management Group.

31. In 1972, the unifying theme of the pioneering United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was "Only One Earth". Thirty-four years after that conference, nearly 20 years after the World Commission on Environment and Development put sustainable development on the map, 14 years after the Earth Summit in Rio, 4 years after the World Summit on Sustainable Development and nearly one year after the World Summit which launched the new United Nations reform process, the common goal and challenge for all the agencies and peoples of our United Nations remains to reform and strengthen our global to local policies, laws and institutions for managing the human, financial, technological and natural resources of our "only one earth" for the benefit of present *and* future generations.