

Note on

UN System Information Exchange on Environmental Capacity Building and the Role of the Environmental Management Group

Summary

The present note provides an overview on the status of the EMG's work in the area of environmental capacity building, including the results and the recommendations of the three surveys conducted by the Group in identifying the role of the EMG in the area of information exchange on environmental capacity building. It concludes by highlighting the possible options and the way ahead in establishing an EMG information network on environmental capacity building.

Introduction:

Almost a year ago the Environmental Management Group (EMG) at its 6th session in February 2004 decided to focus on the issue of environmental aspects of capacity building with the aim of contributing to the ongoing efforts of the UN system to facilitate a more coordinated UN system information exchange on environmental capacity building activities, lessons learned, experiences and best practices in the context of the WSSD Plan of Implementation and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's).

In order to define the scope of its work and its contribution, the Group established an Issue Management Group (IMG) on capacity building. Given the broad and cross-cutting nature of "Capacity Building" the IMG narrowed down its focus and centred its work in the two specific areas of biological diversity and chemicals as a pilot exercise. The Group consequently prepared two surveys on the current UN system capacity building activities in those two areas, including the agencies' and MEAs' experiences, lessons learned and best practices. The studies also provided some recommendations on the possible role and contribution of the EMG with a focus on information exchange.

On the basis of the two surveys and the valuable information solicited from the UN agencies, the Group prepared a third survey which highlights the existing UN system information exchange networks on capacity building, the needs and gaps and the possible supplementary role and added value of the EMG vis-à-vis the current networks.

The following conclusions have been drawn from the above studies, regarding the potential role of the EMG. These conclusions should now enable the Group to determine its role and contribution in the area of information sharing on environmental capacity building:

The biological diversity and the chemicals surveys

The two surveys on biological diversity and chemicals confirmed that the UN agencies' initiatives on capacity building for biological diversity and chemicals management are diverse and numerous. The biological diversity study, for instance, showed specific areas in which many UN or non-UN actors are involved, such as conservation of biological diversity, sustainable use, research and monitoring, outreach and public awareness, as apposed to other areas, such as biosafety and access and benefit-sharing, where there is less focus by the same entities.

The two surveys presented as well an overview of existing joint – horizontal - activities of agencies and conventions. They both showed disparity or lack of focus on horizontal linkages, as most of the activities and projects were focused on vertical issues. The surveys also showed that the inter-sectoral cooperative frameworks on capacity building are sparse.

Conclusion 1:

The Surveys recommended that an EMG information-sharing network could provide a comparative view on the existing environmental capacity building activities, the areas of low and high concentration and the best practices. They recommended that the EMG network could also provide information on activities and cooperative frameworks in cross-cutting areas, which would promote horizontal cooperation across the UN system.

From the point of view of the experiences and lessons learned, the two surveys proved the wealth of experience that exists within the UN system. The surveys observed that all agencies and conventions involved in those two areas have accumulated information on how to best undertake capacity building activities with their clients. This includes a wide range of thematic areas and often refers to the national (regional, local) application of global policies, mechanisms and instruments. These experiences are, without any doubt, of major interest to all UN agencies and MEAs as well as other organisations involved with capacity building.

Conclusion 2:

An EMG information sharing network could gather information and knowledge on the UN system experiences and best practices. It could promote and integrate such knowledge across the UN system.

The surveys added that some agencies have compiled information on their capacity building undertakings¹, but generally there is an apparent lack of self-assessment of the efficiency of those activities by agencies.

Conclusion 3:

The EMG could assist its members in their efforts of assessing the efficiency of environmental capacity building activities in the context of achieving the internationally agreed goals such as the MDGs. As a result, high-quality information on effective capacity building approaches would enable the development of more coherent and effective policies by global, regional, national and local stakeholders and thus provide ownership to policy implementation.

¹ For example:

UNEP [2002]. *Capacity building for sustainable development: An overview of UNEP environmental capacity development activities*. Nairobi.

UNEP [2004]. *Profile of UNEP Capacity Building and Technology Support Activities*. Nairobi.

Conclusion 4:

The surveys stressed the comparative advantage of the EMG in enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation, given its broad and diverse membership, whereas existing sector-specific frameworks are often limited in membership and focused on specific sectoral issues.

The EMG network and its contribution to the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building

The Intergovernmental Working Group on an Intergovernmental Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building (IGSP) stressed the importance of and the need for further cooperation and synergies among the UN organizations in the area of environmental capacity building. As requested by the Intergovernmental Group, the EMG provided the IGSP with information on the current UN system capacity building and technology support activities, including the outcome of its two surveys on capacity building in the areas of biological diversity and chemicals management as well as a UN consolidated input on environmental capacity building.

Taking note of the above, the IGSP stressed the need for continued cooperation and coordination among the UN actors and that the Strategic Plan should facilitate coordination, collaboration and synergies among activities of different organisations on capacity-building. It should foster closer cooperation between UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements and other stakeholders.

In that context, and given that effective UN system information sharing is considered by Governments as a key to the success of the Bali Strategic Plan, the EMG through its network could support the implementation of the Plan by:

- ✓ Providing a continued and up-dated overview of existing UN system environmental capacity building activities, including existing cooperative frameworks and partnerships
- ✓ Gathering the UN organizations' self assessment (overview) of their environment-related capacity building activities (challenges, experiences, lessons learned)
- ✓ Providing an interactive platform that enables effective communications between UN agencies, donors and recipients on environmental capacity building, experiences, best practices, opportunities, challenges and approaches for future action and cooperation.

The survey on the existing UN system information exchange frameworks on environmental capacity building and possible options for EMG²

The aim of this survey was to identify the existing information-sharing frameworks related to capacity building, the supplementary role and the added value of an EMG network and to propose some options /designs for such a network.

After identifying the major existing networks, their background, membership, mandate and current work, the survey provided the following ideas on the added value and complementary role of the EMG:

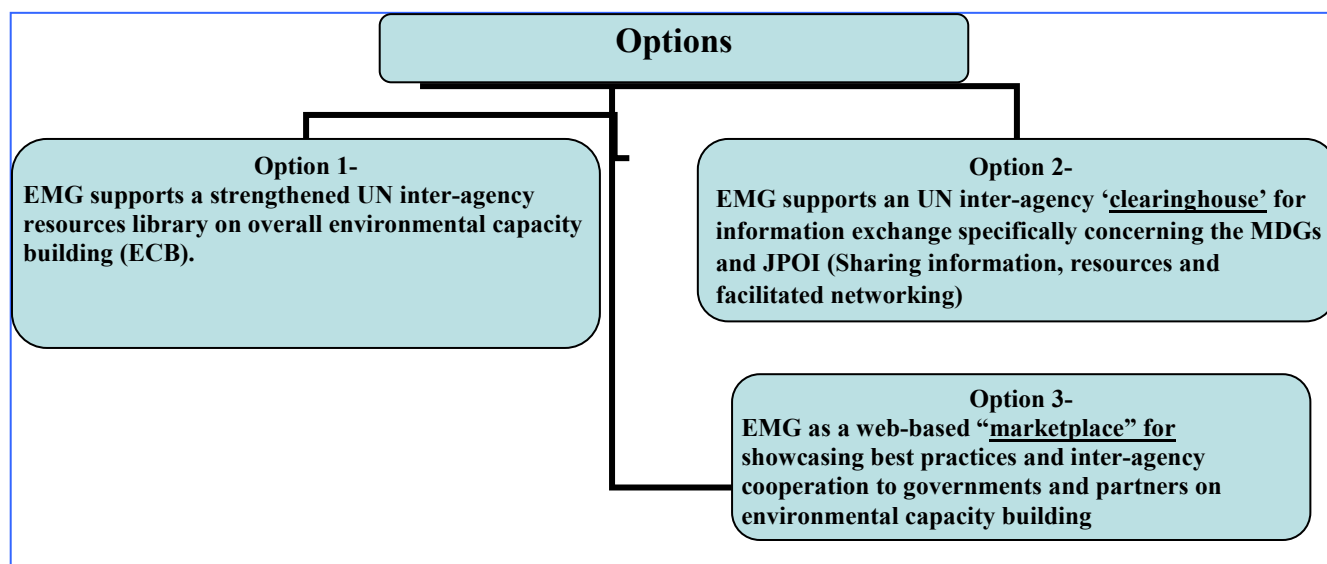
- An EMG network would help *the UN system agencies* to exchange information and identify common areas of interest in achieving common objectives, such as those contained in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI).
- It would provide *a mechanism which enhances horizontal linkages* on environmental capacity building and enables cooperation on cross-cutting issues.
- The EMG network would provide *a platform or database* whereby the UN actors could exchange information on their *comparative experiences, lessons learned, best practices and institution-wide contacts*. As such it would promote institutional experiences across the different sectors and institutions.
- Despite the fact that capturing the valuable information (such as lessons learned and experiences) may be difficult to attain, it is essential to note that at the moment various organizations do not have the required information in the same format. To deal with this, the EMG network could provide a *harmonized format for presenting information on environmental issues and capacity building*. The role of the EMG could be to facilitate information exchange and to codify the ‘*useful*’ information. This would have to be done with due regard to the mandates of individual organizations.
- The EMG network could also act as an analytical tool in providing a *comparative view on UN system activities* in specific focal areas or geographical regions.

Given the above, the study proposed some options for consideration of the EMG. The options incorporate the design parameters suggested by the EMG members taking into account the diversity of their mandates.

² Study by consultant Stephanie Hodge

Figure 1: Options:

Enhancing Information Exchange on Environmental Capacity Building



OPTION 1: developing a multi-functional information sharing mechanism at the global level.

The objective is to support synergies by delivering *key knowledge services* and information exchange on environmental capacity building to EMG members.

This type of clearinghouse³ contributes to improving cooperation between the international organizations by ‘facilitating’ coordination of relevant activities and through making use of the synergies they offer. This approach also employs an organized *network of networks* and uses the decentralized capabilities of the Internet. As such, it provides links and search mechanisms to all related sites maintained by the other international organizations. For example, the information and the content of sites remain under the responsibility of the *owner* of the individual site that is responsible for access, quality and maintenance of the data and information provided. The EMG could establish criteria for the selection of cooperating sites and for standards of information and data provided.

³ The concept of a “clearinghouse” as an information sharing mechanism has become popular over the past years along with the considerable advances made in the development of the Internet and in the fields of information management technology and computer networking. A clearing house can be defined as an Internet-based centre for the collection, classification and distribution of information held by recognized (authorized) organizations that are competent in the issues dealt with by the clearing house. As such, a clearing house provides its users with sophisticated search tools to access relevant information and data that are kept and maintained, to a large extent, by the original sources of information.

Benefits

- ✓ *Cost-effective exchange of information, transfer of expertise and best practices among the agencies and related institutions concerning environmental capacity building*
- ✓ *Dissemination of evidence-based knowledge, methods and tools (e.g. to carry out assessments of plans and projects) related to environmental capacity building*
- ✓ *Build capacities and skills concerning environmental capacity building*

OPTION 2 - EMG Clearinghouse (information exchange platform) on the environmental aspects of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI)⁴

In comparison to option one, this clearinghouse is a more directed mechanism that:

- (a) *assists UN agencies and convention secretariats by facilitating the exchange of information on and experience with assisting countries in implementing their commitments related to the Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI)*
- (b) *builds inter-agency capacities on environmental capacity building*

This approach employs the same *design* principles as option one, except that the network is primarily concerned with disseminating, collecting information and resources and networking on programmes concerned with the Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

Benefits

The mechanism provides targeted knowledge services, including resources on environmental capacity building, and an information exchange mechanism in order to enhance inter-agency programme alignment and greater policy coherence related to the MDGs' framework and the JPOI. The main benefits include:

- ✓ *A cost-effective exchange of information, transfer of expertise and best practices among all agencies and institutions on MDGs and JPOI*
- ✓ *A facility for dissemination of evidence-based knowledge and of methods and tools (e.g. to carry out assessments of plans and projects on the MDGs and JPOI)*
- ✓ *An inter-agency facility that supports the integration of environmental aspects of MDGs into programmes and policies*

⁴ <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/index.html>

- ✓ *An inter-agency facility for the development of staff capacity and skills concerning implementation of the MDGs and JPOI*

OPTION 3: The EMG as a marketplace – A showcase of inter-agency ‘Best Practices’ and international cooperation on environmental capacity building

This mechanism is directed at showing the EMG members’ best practices and successes to governments, partners and the general public on a website. Its goal would be to improve the quality of UN analytic work that is disseminated to governments and partners. In particular, an EMG advocacy website could:

- (a) Help governments and partners to access information, resources and analytical work*
- (b) Provide users with the opportunity to view standardized and customized tool kits and best practices*
- (c) Contribute to donor cooperation initiatives*

Benefits

- ✓ *A cost-effective showcase for displaying best practices and successes to learn from*
- ✓ *An advocacy network directed to governments and partners who benefit by learning about UN cooperation on environmental capacity building*
- ✓ *A promotional website about EMG cooperation on environmental capacity building for governments and key partners*