

The UNEP That We Want¹

Reflections on UNEP's future challenges

Prangins, Switzerland, September 17, 2007

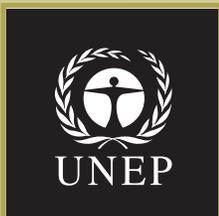
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At the request of UNEP and with funding from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNEP, IISD convened a group of individuals with substantial experience in international environmental affairs to reflect for a day on the nature and evolution of our environmental challenges, to discuss appropriate responses and to consider the role of UNEP in deploying these responses. They met in Prangins, Switzerland, on September 17, 2007. This note summarizes some of the reflections recorded during the day.

The immediate purpose was to provide one of many inputs to the process of drawing up UNEP's Medium-term Strategy (2010–2013). This process is underway and UNEP is organizing a range of consultations with different constituencies to feed and enrich the planning process. The Executive Director of UNEP had asked the group not to focus particularly on UNEP, but to articulate its understanding of the key environmental challenges the world will face five, 10 or 20 years from now. This would allow UNEP to ascertain whether it is preparing adequately for these challenges.

While the group did, to some extent, follow this advice, the debate inevitably returned to UNEP and how best it might meet the challenges that are already present, and that will only grow worse in the years to come. There was a palpable consensus on the importance of a strong and effective UN environment program as well as on the changes that would have to occur for UNEP to merit that description. They are summarized below. The summary does not attempt to reflect the long, full and rich discussion held during the day, but instead to relate a few of the key elements around which there was considerable common ground among the group.

This note is organized in two parts. The first part briefly reflects ideas on a vision for UNEP and summarizes ideas around three key characteristics of the UNEP challenge: the role of science; the response to the needs of developing countries; and the role of UNEP in the broader UN family of organizations. The second part focuses more sharply on three aspects of UNEP's transition challenge: the narrative; the work style; and, as an illustration, on a few of the issues we hope UNEP will take up. It is important to note that each section offers *elements* that we believe UNEP should consider and not a complete offering. They should be seen very much as a contribution to the debate on where UNEP



"UNEP has never found the way to prevail within the UN system, where it remains a fairly powerless and un-influential player," write Halle.

¹ At the UNEP GC/GMEF last February, a Peruvian NGO presented a book entitled "El Perú que Queremos." This clever title plays on the double meaning of the verb in Spanish, since it translates both as "The Peru we want" and "The Peru we love." In Spanish, this note would be entitled "El PNUMA que Queremos." It focuses on the UNEP we want, but is born from a sense of the UNEP we love, or would like to love.

should go from here, and not as a self-sufficient prescription for future success. That they are elements, contributions, in no way diminishes the importance that the participants ascribe to them. Indeed, they reflect a strong sense within the group that unless UNEP makes some of the shifts and transitions suggested, the chances of it making a major difference are, and will remain, dim.

Vision

Addressing the current environmental challenges requires the environment to move to the centre of political and economic decision-making. It follows that UNEP must evolve from being a marginal player at the intergovernmental level to becoming a central player. The argument for doing so rests on the recognition that the prosperity of the world—both achieving greater prosperity in most of the world and maintaining the prosperity that exists already in some parts—depends on maintaining the productivity of the world’s major geo-biological cycles. As these are all under serious threat, we must accept that our prospects for prosperity are similarly under serious threat.

Responding to this threat requires sound science, good policy and astute politics. UNEP has proved competent in mobilizing the first; occasionally competent in the second; and largely absent in the third. It must urgently seek to correct this imbalance.

The challenge is to organize and ensure the environmental conditions for prosperity and security, on a sustainable basis. Such are the challenges that they represent—now for the environment—a situation similar to the challenge faced in the immediate post-WWII period in Bretton Woods, where nations rose to the challenge of organizing and ensuring the economic conditions for prosperity and security and the basis in international law on which they rest.

We require an Environmental Bretton Woods for the 21st century. UNEP must provide leadership in at least two respects. It must mobilize to assess the environmentally-based risks to prosperity, security and equity on a continuous basis, and at different geographic levels, including the country level. It must ensure that these assessments are placed in front of those with power and leverage. And it must be in the forefront of the process of convening, developing, managing and overseeing the constant evolution of rules and regulations needed to ensure the

environmental basis for prosperity and security. Indeed, its role is to “tee up” the next generation of such rules.

UNEP and Science

UNEP attracts a good deal of controversy and there are as many views on its optimal role as there are viewers. One thing, however, is relatively free from controversy, and that is that UNEP should be the source of the best science supporting policy. Beyond that, controversy begins to arise over what sort of science UNEP should deploy, what vehicles are best suited to deploying it and how to ensure that it genuinely does lead to better policy.

There is a clear sense that UNEP should be assessing risks and ensuring both evolution and harmonization of standards, rules and regulations, as noted above. It should also be making available constant assessments of best practice and state-of-the-art reports in different fields, for example in evaluating the environmental sources of social instability and conflict. That said the group was critical of UNEP’s tendency to focus on the environment *per se*, rather than on what the environment can do for other areas of human endeavour.

What is required is not just science, but science with economic literacy. If the best science is to lead to the best policy, then science people have to be mixed with policy people. The scientific consensus that UNEP can help draw out around key issues must be matched by a serious attempt to reach a policy consensus on the appropriate response. To take the case of biodiversity, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment demonstrated that the loss of biodiversity represents a threat in many ways as serious as that of our changing climate. Yet biodiversity is presented in a language incomprehensible to the layperson (much less the politician). What we need to know is not just what is happening to our biodiversity; we need to know how to do biodiversity conservation politically.

UNEP should urgently consider how it is to convene the science necessary to rise to the existing and future challenges. One suggestion is to establish two high-level advisory bodies—one on science and one on economics, or possibly even one that combines both skills. This does not obviate the need for UNEP to establish the positions of Chief Scientist and Chief Economist, both at a very senior level.

UNEP and Equity

The science agenda and the resulting focus of UNEP on global issues are important to all UNEP member countries, but are especially popular with the richer ones. The poorer ones are more concerned with the link between poverty and the environment and immediate assistance at the country level. The Bali Strategic Plan articulates the latter orientation and gives UNEP its marching orders in this respect. Moving forward in a way perceived by many as contrary to this Plan will inevitably look like a betrayal of the poorer member states.

It should not be. The fact is that UNEP does not have and, in all likelihood, never will have the resources to make much of an impact on the ground through direct, country-level activity. There are better ways to serve its constituency of poorer countries. The first is to change the narrative, moving away from the “poverty” agenda with its negative connotations to a “prosperity and equity” agenda. But whatever solution is chosen, UNEP must reinforce its regional presence and strengthen its regional offices.

This new approach would focus the agenda both on the environmental underpinnings of prosperity and the search for it, and on the patterns of consumption and production that underlie this prosperity. It would help focus the world community on the root causes of environmental stress, on the extraordinary, equity-denying affluence in some parts of the world, and on the consumption patterns on which that affluence depends and that makes sustainability appear beyond reach.

UNEP must mobilize the key developing countries behind the new directions it wishes to adopt. But it must do so in a way that avoids this agenda becoming an “OECD plus BRICS” agenda, serving the emerging elite and leaving out the less fortunate developing countries.

UNEP and the UN Family

UNEP has never found the way to prevail within the UN system, where it remains a fairly powerless and un-influential player. This must change. We live in a world where influence is achieved either with “personalities, bullets or budgets.” Shunning the military solution in line with the UN Charter, and recognizing that it will never have the budgets needed to “bribe” the UN into environmental respectability,

UNEP must make more of its personality, and that of its leader.

In terms of its leader’s personality, this note sets out the group’s ideas in the section on Work Style below. In terms of the personality of the organization, there are three priorities. The first is to withdraw from competition with other UN agencies on operational activities. UNEP has neither the budget nor the competence to make a difference through country-level activities, even if some of its member states demand them and the Bali Plan opens a space for UNEP to conduct them. They are pointless and damaging to UNEP’s relations within the UN family. A possible exception involves capacity strengthening, but even this should be re-oriented, as suggested below. That said, if UNEP is to withdraw, then others—and, in particular, UNDP—will have to pick up the slack, and UNEP will have a role in ensuring that they do so.

The second is for UNEP to become “the different UN organization,” and thereby to pioneer a new style of work. This requires going beyond a narrow interpretation of UNEP’s stakeholders as comprising its member states—or even the world’s governments—and recruiting a far wider community of support, in civil society, the academic world and the private sector. Not only is much of this wider community naturally supportive of UNEP, and inclined to offer its backing willingly, doing so would greatly expand UNEP’s effective reach, influence and the leverage achieved with its scant funds.

The third is for UNEP to become considerably more entrepreneurial, launching initiatives that will often spin off into an autonomous or even independent status. But it must retain and build on the credibility that these initiatives confer. The fact that Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is only occasionally associated with UNEP is a scandal and a tragedy. But UNEP must also learn to identify and properly support its more entrepreneurial initiatives (such as the UNEP Finance Initiative) and reform its mechanisms for working with non-government constituencies.

Shifting Gears – UNEP for Tomorrow

If UNEP were to follow the advice set out above, it would represent a major improvement in its effectiveness and impact and take it some way along the road to filling the niche that needs to be filled.

And yet it would not be enough. The group felt that we have a 10- to 15-year window in which to reverse current trends and place the world on a sustainable path. The bad news is that there is little sign of the shift taking place; the good news is that concern for climate change offers a political opportunity we have not had in years, and a platform on which to set the stage for the sort of transformation we need. Below, we set out some of what we think is needed to change UNEP into an organization with teeth, as opposed to “an organization with dentures” as one participant expressed it. In doing so, we take many of the points above and augment them by a quantum.

The Narrative

UNEP has an important—indeed a critical—message, but it is delivering it in the wrong language to the wrong audience. It is attached to the wrong narrative. It will never position itself to do what is needed until it finds the right language and narrative. The force of this message cannot be over-emphasized. UNEP’s success depends on getting this right.

The environment should compete with religion as the only compelling, value-based narrative available to humanity. To do that, however, it will have to make itself relevant well beyond the world of those already concerned with the environment, including very prominently its own formal constituency. Indeed, unless UNEP succeeds in recasting the debate, it is highly likely that the economic community will do it—badly, and on its own terms. It is already happening in the field of climate change.

The world will be driven by the decisions made by investors and consumers. UNEP must work out who best influences investment decisions and address them; it must identify what influences consumer choice, and focus on influencing that.

It is a cliché to state that environment is and must be part of economic and development policy. What we have done less well is to articulate how—through what mechanisms and pathways—the environment influences the outcomes of economic and development efforts, and how success in these depends on the decisions taken relative to the environment.

Influencing economic policy means messaging in its language, and stating the case in terms that carry with

the economic policy community and the business community that it serves. We believe that the environment argument should be recast in terms of its importance for and potential contribution to *Prosperity, Stability and Equity*.

Prosperity is what we all aim to secure or defend. It is the upside agenda to poverty alleviation’s downside agenda. Demonstrating how prosperity depends on and is in fact impossible without a healthy environment positions environment as a highly positive contribution to human goals rather than as a reason why our problems are so dire.

Stability is the watchword of the business community—the essential precondition of development. Anything that threatens stability and security similarly threatens investment and profit, especially if it presents security threats at the same time. This, too, is an agenda that will carry politically.

And Equity is a precondition of both Stability and Prosperity. Unless we greatly increase equity, neither of the other two is an option. Equity is a better way to approach the North-South agenda, the poverty agenda, and the production/consumption agenda than the traditional one. Politically, it carries better than development. UNEP needs to restructure its narrative around these three objectives, relating each of these three goals back to its core areas of competence.

UNEP needs not only a politically compelling narrative, it needs to find the right voice and vehicles to deliver it. The new UNEP narrative must help it to ensure the evolution of its constituency. UNEP must focus on priorities that meet two characteristics: they should appeal to the more powerful ministers responsible for economic policy; and they should empower environment ministers at the cabinet table. UNEP’s message is not for environment ministers—the already-converted. It must focus on making the case that disruption of environmental services will disrupt real lives and economies. In other words, UNEP should aim higher.

As one member of the group expressed it: economics has great theory but lousy data while environment has great data but lousy theory. It is essential that the new UNEP narrative develop a robust theory to match its strong evidence of environmental degradation and its threat to prosperity, stability and equity.

Work Style

Just as there is a need to revisit the UNEP narrative, there is a need to reconsider the way in which it operates. The first part of this note calls for UNEP to broaden its effective constituency and to work more creatively with civil society, academia and the private sector to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship, and to test new models on how to get things done. However, as will be clear from the preceding section, the change must run deeper than that.

We have established that we must give environment ministers the tools with which to be relevant to finance ministers and heads of government. This includes developing economic tools that take the environment into account. This will help shift the focus to economic management and away from the environment *per se*. It will help shift the focus to the root causes of our environmental challenges and away from the challenges themselves. And it will place UNEP in charge of the environmental hinterland on which economic development depends if it is to deliver prosperity, stability and equity.

Such a focus will help UNEP rise above the limitations that its governance structure places on it in reality. It is not so much a counsel to move away from a focus on governments but to supplement it. And with governments, the focus should be on recruiting to the cause those countries that will be the most significant over the coming 20 years—such as China and India. With these countries, the challenge is to get to the finance ministers, not merely the environment ministers. The Environmental Management Group should be used more judiciously as an outreach tool to other members of the UNEP family.

As noted above, UNEP is expected to meet developing country needs to build capacity. However, the focus of such capacity strengthening should be to give tools and a new approach and language to these countries, not simply training.

Beyond governments, it is essential to mobilize a range of other communities that are natural or potential supporters of UNEP's mission. This way, UNEP works not with one agenda but with a series of parallel or interwoven agendas, and multiplies the potential sources of support. UNEP has a large natural constituency and this constituency needs to be harnessed to the UNEP mission without appearing to

make an end-run around the member governments. This includes finding the right way to interact with, and draw the best from, the university and student community, and think tanks. In this respect, it has an asset in the Executive Director, whose background and experience spans several of the key constituencies.

But mobilization is not just about constituents. UNEP needs to mobilize the best examples, the best practice from around the world and make it available for global adaptation or implementation. UNEP must be a multiplier and a broker, bringing good ideas to the global marketplace, making judicious use of the Web to do so. It should, for example, take a concept like the Ecological Footprint and ensure that it is used more routinely. Indeed, UNEP should be shameless in being entrepreneurial with the ideas of others, wherever they may be found, provided they are good ideas.

It must make a habit of challenging unsustainable behaviour and practice, wherever it is found, and to mobilize its constituency to associate it with the challenge. The range of risk assessments relating environmental degradation to threats to prosperity, stability and equity are powerful tools with which to do this.

UNEP must also upgrade its interaction with the private sector. It has many good examples to draw from, and notably the UNEP Finance Initiative or, more modestly, the Global Reporting Initiative. It should examine closely how to incubate such creative, entrepreneurial initiatives and aim to be a seed-bed for many such ideas.

These initiatives also represent a means to reach corporate CEOs, and to provide a means to feed ideas upwards to corporate boards, and downwards to corporations. A high-level corporate advisory structure may be useful in this respect. However, it may make sense to work with the private sector by UNEP activity area, creating force where business meets business. UNEP should also develop work on transversal issues such as the link between business and science, the need to rationalize the regulatory framework or to harmonize environmental standards—or to create an overarching framework for existing standards.

The Issues

The group did not spend much time trying to identify the issues that should form UNEP's priority areas of

work, partly since they broadly supported the five identified by the UNEP Senior Management Team and partly since the choice of issues is not UNEP's fundamental challenge. A number of ideas were expressed, many of which are noted above—a focus on economic policy, on root causes of environmental issues, on the key problems of tomorrow such as the environmental implications of mega-cities. Specific ideas on how to deal with specific challenges were also proposed. On biodiversity, for example, it was proposed that UNEP develop—based on the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment—an index of investibility that would rate countries on the basis of the extent to which loss of biodiversity might undermine investment returns, or that might be avoided because neglect of biodiversity had attained such high proportions.

Instead, the group focused on climate change as an illustration not so much of what issues UNEP should pick (the group supported the identification of climate change as one of the priority focus areas), but of the possible niche that UNEP might seek to occupy, given the considerations set out above.

It is clear that UNEP must take advantage of windows of opportunity to make its case. Like a surfer, it must spot the waves it can ride. The biggest, most magnificent political wave at present and in the immediate future is climate change, and UNEP should not fail to ride it. But it must find and occupy its niche.

While time did not permit a detailed discussion of this niche, nor a detailed description of it, it did offer a range of considerations for a UNEP-appropriate climate change focus. First, there is a clear role for

UNEP in promoting greater energy efficiency, and disseminating best practice in energy use in buildings, in transport, in industry and much more, including incentives to conserve energy and disincentives for wasting it.

Second, the group proposed that UNEP consider a range of country-based risk assessments relating climate-based environmental change to water availability, desertification, the movement of peoples, the undermining of security and stability, the spread of disease and so on. These country-level assessments could be aggregated up to the regional and global levels.

Third, UNEP can help articulate the climate change/development link. UNEP—and the environment—offers a way to combine and make sense of a wide range of issues relating to climate change, based on the challenge of securing essential resources and ecological services threatened by climate change as a guarantee of future prosperity, stability and equity.

Finally, there is a strong case for a UNEP role in adaptation—ensuring the sort of resource management in developing countries that will allow them to withstand the effects of climate change, matched with a series of related commitments on the part of the North. It was clear to the group that UNEP should not enter into competition with other UN players on country-level adaptation projects at the operational level.

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