

STATE OF THE WORLD 2012

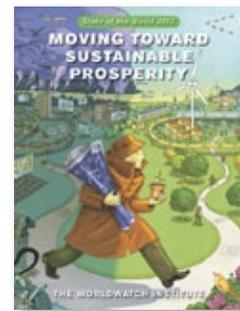
Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity

POLICY BRIEFS

Chapter 8

A New Global Architecture for Sustainability Governance

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KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ Reform aimed at improving international environmental institutions, specifically the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), will be key in the struggle for sustainability.
- ▶ Two options for reform are being discussed: enhancing UNEP but maintaining its position as a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly, or transforming UNEP into a specialized agency of the United Nations.
- ▶ Discussions over several years have not yielded consensus. Yet it is worth learning from the deliberations that preceded the creation of UNEP in the early 1970s.
- ▶ Simply changing the architectural structure will not automatically resolve the challenges that UNEP faces. Instead, UNEP needs to redouble its efforts to weave together different strands of environment work in the UN system and provide a center of gravity and coordination. To that end, it needs to be given greater authority, augmented funding, and enhanced connectivity across the UN system.

THE PROBLEM

Created at the 1972 Stockholm Conference, UNEP was set up to be a catalyst, a center of connectivity and organization that could achieve better environmental results by working with other branches of the United Nations. Governments and scholars did not want to make UNEP a special agency due to a variety of issues, such as overlap with other agencies already performing similar functions and the arduous process of creating another cumbersome agency.

UNEP was to be the center of environmental affairs. In the 1970s, however, it was widely viewed as an unqualified newcomer to offer advice to more established specialized agencies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), or as a direct challenger to

the competency of well-established bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Over the past 40 years, UNEP has also experienced chronic underfunding. Moreover, while UNEP's location in Nairobi, Kenya, provides insight to pertinent issues in the developing world, there has been a dearth of regular communication with UN specialized agencies and with the media. Unfortunately, UNEP has largely lacked the authority, financial resources, and connectivity needed to bring its purpose to fruition.

MOVING FORWARD

A variety of steps can be taken to improve UNEP's effectiveness as an international environmental institution. These include:

- ▶ *Improve authority.* When proponents first considered the creation of an international environmental organization, there were proposals to create it outside of the UN, to limit membership to industrialized countries, and to endow this body with real enforcement powers. Analysts noticed, however, that countries were not willing to cede environmental policymaking to an all-powerful, super-national board. Also, specialized agencies of the UN, which had larger staff, resources, and infrastructure, questioned UNEP's ability to serve as the center of a global environmental network.
- ▶ Now, after 40 years of work, UNEP is no longer a new organization. Recruiting first-rate experts in all of UNEP's divisions to speak, write, and deliver on behalf of the organization could drastically enhance the institution's authority. Creating a scientific advisory body that is independently governed and operated could also advance that goal. In addition, creating a High Commissioner of Sustainability in the Office of the UN Secretary-General would create substantial authority for UNEP, help bring in additional resources, and give a focal point for media coverage.
- ▶ *Increase connectivity.* UNEP's geographical isolation in Nairobi, far from other UN centers,

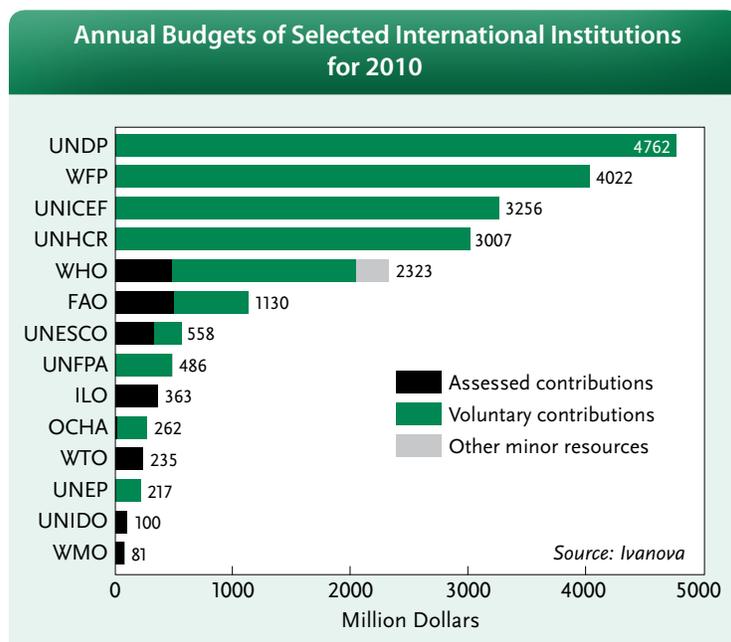
has made it difficult for the institution to be the center of global environmental affairs, and UNEP still has few direct links to the media, limiting its reputation and authority. Moreover, many UN agencies have created environmental systems of their own. UNEP needs to make connectivity a priority, in part by elevating its presence and visibility at UN headquarters in New York. Providing regular, high-quality inputs in discussions would help increase its authority among peers and constituencies. Strengthening UNEP's Environmental Management Group is another important step toward enhancing its coordinating role. Information and communication technologies available today could significantly reduce the difficulties of long-distance communication.

- ▶ *Increase financial resources.* UNEP's voluntary funding base has attracted much criticism. Mandatory contributions from member states would bring a greater degree of stability and predictability. However, voluntary funding per se does not explain UNEP's comparatively small budget of \$217 million: in 2010, the four largest an-

nual budgets within the UN system were those of subsidiary bodies that rely solely on voluntary funding—the United Nations Development Programme, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Indeed, even specialized agencies depend on voluntary funding to a large extent: more than half of the total budget in the case of WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and UNESCO.

LOOKING AHEAD

The fundamental vision, functions, and form that UNEP's original architects devised remain valid today. There is no one design that will solve all the challenges facing UNEP, and simply providing the institution with a new name as a specialized agency will not be enough. Instead, whether UNEP remains a subsidiary body or is changed to a specialized agency, improving authority, augmenting financial resources, and enhancing connectivity could help improve the efficacy of UNEP.



This brief is based on Chapter 8, "A New Global Architecture for Sustainability Governance," by Maria Ivanova, published in Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World 2012: Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity*.

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