**UNU “Interlinkages Initiative” Aims at Coherent Sustainable Development**

by Jerry Velasquez

Since the 1972 World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD), most experts agree that progress towards the goals set in Agenda 21 has been unsatisfactory. The world has been waiting for a modus operandi for ground-level operation. It is not that we have misunderstood the problems. What we have failed to do is to prepare the socio-economic systems that would have to deal with complex inter-linked problems. Our laws, conventions, treaties, institutions, mechanisms and information are all developed in isolation and are often segregated based on topic or theme. For example, although we know that we have to deal with environment and development at the same time, most institutions now still focus mainly on one or the other. This is the same for all the other issues within Agenda 21.

In order to promote the further implementation of Agenda 21, we need to fill the gap between our perception of problems and our solution making process through strategic approaches that would clarify the linkages between our ecosystems and our socio-economic institutions. These approaches need not only look at the inter-linked and complex nature of our problems, but would also need to look at the complex and inter-linked nature of the solutions proposed and the systems that would need to fill the gap between our perception and our response.

**National Action Key to Success of Inter-Linkages Approach**

Of the different levels where inter-linkages can be applied, it is perhaps the national level where the best opportunities exist. This is because it is, ultimately, a national government that will have to make decisions to utilize natural synergies and engage in meaningful policy coordination.

National governments are also in the best position to understand the ways in which issues can best be linked, and through what practical measures, such as: monitoring and reporting systems, focal points, research, capacity building, and policies and regulations. The priorities of each country can also be more sensitively identified and related to other socio-economic and development concerns by national level decision-makers. National governments are also responsible for the inter-governmental processes that guide numerous global, international and regional agreements.

**Institutions**

The essential parts of national mechanisms are regional and sub-regional institutions, which can take global environmental issues and refocus them into priorities and manageable agendas for national governments. Synergies between global and regional institutions are, therefore, important for the more efficient and effective implementation of global sustainable development commitments. From a problem solving perspective the scale of shared environmental problems, and the connections between them, suggest that a regional and sub-regional approach to inter-linkages will be effective. A number of environmental agreements and action plans, which exist at the regional level, also raise the importance of creating better coordination among regional instruments.

**More Research Needed**

At both the national and regional levels, more research and understanding is required to create better systems and inter-sectoral models based on the ecosystem approach to sustainable development. More standardized linkages are “basic and pervasive.” It recommends an “issue management” approach to address matters that cut across the mandates of institutions concerned with environment and sustainable development. Feasibility study by the World Conservation and Monitoring Centre (WCMC) on the most practical opportunities for creating synergies and coordination among existing environmental instruments highlights the need for a single system of data collection and reporting. Ways and means of developing an actual joint information system for the biodiversity conventions are currently underway within the WCMC, now a body within UNEP.

**2000:** UNEP issues “Geo 2000” report, following up its 1997 “Global Environmental Outlook.”

**2001:** Work in Progress: The Millennium Eco-system Assessment (MA), a broad inter-agency effort to set baselines on the state of ecosystems and the estimated total goods and services they provide, is under way. It seeks to establish a fully integrated scientific assessment of the impact of biophysical changes on ecosystems, with regional case studies and models focusing on implications for national decisions.

**2002:** A decade after the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro, world leaders will gather to take stock of progress at a special session of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development. Immediately before the session, a second International Conference on Inter-linkages will focus on the synergy and coordination aspects of sustainable development.
Stronger Global Governance of Environment Seen as Necessary for Sustainable Development

The difficulties of articulating and implementing a coherent approach to sustainable development has turned increasing attention to the need for stronger international governance on environmental issues. The options range from improved coordination and cooperation to the creation of a World Environment Organization that would, like the World Trade Organization, have a dispute settlement mechanism implementing a set of common principles.

The inter-linkages concept is focused on the recommendations of the Rio Agenda 21, UN conventions, and of national efforts to link these conventions at the implementation level. The objective of the survey is to deepen the understanding of the patterns of implementation and identify potential areas of synergy between the Rio instruments.

A regional review, beginning with ESCAP countries in July 2000, of the implementation of the Rio Conventions and of national efforts to link these conventions at the implementation level. The aim is to identify and explore issues related to inter-linkages and examine implementation programs supported by international bodies. In late 2001, the UNU proposes to host a Global Thematic Consultation for Rio+10 in Tokyo to synthesize the recommendations made in the different regional consultations and help disseminate their findings.

For more information about the project, contact Dr. Jerry Velasquez at jerry@geic.or.jp or visit the UNU homepage at http://www.unu.edu/.

Dr. Jerry Velasquez is the Director of the Inter-Linkages Initiative at UNU.

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have to implement these solutions. The United Nations University (UNU) contribution to this broad-based effort is the “Inter-linkages Initiative.”

The strategic concept behind it is that sustainable development requires an approach that promotes greater connectivity between ecosystems and societal actions. It is comprised of two fundamental elements: synergism and coordination.

On a practical level this involves greater cohesion among institutional, environmental issue-based, and development-focused responses to the challenges of sustainable development. Success requires that a range of international, regional and national mechanisms act in close coordination.

The implementation of the Initiative is focused on the recommendations of an international conference on Inter-linkages: Synergies and Coordination in July 1999. To develop greater understanding of the elusive and abstract concepts that underpin the broad overarching principle of Inter-linkages, the conference urged attention to five broad categories: scientific mechanisms; information systems; institutions; finance; and issue management.

The conference established a set of priorities and offered direction on how the inter-linkages concept could be implemented. It highlighted areas requiring further study and recommended a number of follow-up activities.

The conference, which urged international institutions, including the secretariats of existing multilateral environment agreements (MEAs), to collaborate in producing basic “tool kits” for national decision makers, highlighted the need to review the performance of countries and existing regimes, and develop regional priorities for dealing with different transboundary environmental issues.

On “Issue Management,” the conference asked UNU to look at topics ripe for discussion and consider how a coherent approach could be operationalized. On “Scientific Mechanisms,” UNU was asked to focus on gaps in scientific and policy inter-linkages; scientific capacity to address environmental issues; assessment processes; communications and the precautionary principle. On “Institutions,” UNU was asked to review the different ongoing institutional reform and other initiatives at the national, intergovernmental and inter-agency levels including those on dispute settlement and evaluate performance. Urging a global assessment of synergistic capacity to implement MEAs, the conference stressed the need to build the capacity of developing country negotiators to participate effectively in MEA negotiations.

The three-year Initiative program has three main objectives:

1. To develop understanding of the inter-linkages concept and demonstrate how it can be operationalized.
2. To promote awareness between stakeholders of the benefits and gains of effectiveness and efficiency of the inter-linkages approach.
3. To propagate the implementation of inter-linkages between related environmental MEAs at the international, regional and national levels.

Specifically, the Initiative involves the following:

1. A regional review, beginning with ESCAP countries in July 2000, of the implementation of the Rio Conventions and of national efforts to link these conventions at the implementation level.
2. A series of national case studies, beginning with Malaysia in August 2000, have examined issues and challenges to the implementation of the Rio Conventions and their inter-linkages.
3. A series of regional case studies beginning in early 2001, based on the results of national surveys and of regional consultations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, of UN Regional Commissions, MEA Secretariats, and other stakeholders. The aim is to identify and explore issues related to inter-linkages and examine implementation programs supported by international bodies. In late 2001, the UNU proposes to host a Global Thematic Consultation for Rio+10 in Tokyo to synthesize the recommendations made in the different regional consultations and help disseminate their findings.

4. In 2002, just before the 10-year review of the implementation of Agenda 21, UNU will convene a Second International Conference on Inter-linkages. It will assess the results of the three-year Inter-linkages Initiative.

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