

**National Framework for Inter-Linkages:
Bridging Problems and Solutions to Work toward the
Further Implementation of Agenda 21**

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UNU Monitor is a quarterly review of the United Nations University's (UNU) current research activities, publications and forthcoming projects in the area of environment and sustainable development. This issue features an article by Dr. Jerry Velasquez of UNU. This article describes the national framework development for the United Nations University's Inter-linkages Initiative. The Inter-linkages Initiative was the topic of a previous GEC article. For further information regarding the Initiative contact Dr. Jerry Velasquez, UNU Global Environment Information Centre, UNU/GEIC (E-mail: jerry@geic.or.jp, fax: +81-3-3407-8164).

Introduction

Since the 1972 world Environment conference, over two hundred multilateral agreements and a plethora of international organizations have been created to respond to challenges ranging from climate change to persistent organic pollutants. The process has been largely *ad hoc* and fragmented, mirroring the scientific and political muddle of the real world. Over the last decade, the need to bring greater coherence to the scene has been widely felt. Since the 1992 "*Earth Summit*" on Environment and Development adopted *Agenda 21*, efforts at "sustainable development" have engaged the attention of a widening pool of national and international actors.

However, a year before the *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. We have. In fact the basic premise of sustainable development and other environmental soft law that followed it, including the Earth Charter, outlines complex realities and the inter-linked nature of the problems that we have to deal with. 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 (Figure 1). 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 have to implement these solutions.

One such strategic approach is what is known as Inter-linkages. *Inter-linkages* is a strategic approach to managing sustainable development that seeks to promote greater connectivity between ecosystems and societal actions. More precisely, it refers to the functioning and non-functioning of ecosystems; the processes and workings of environmental management which reflects the systemic characteristics of ecosystems and environmental problems; and the interconnection of human processes and environmental processes at all levels of human and natural ecosystem interaction. On a practical level this involves a greater level of cohesiveness among institutional, environmental issue-based, and development focused responses to the challenges of sustainable development as well as the range of international, regional and national mechanisms that share this challenge.

The inter-linkages approach to sustainable development is comprised of two fundamental elements: synergism and coordination. It is believed that a synergistic approach to sustainable development will lead to more effective and resource efficient assessment, negotiation, decision-making, planning, and implementation of policies. Similarly, improved coordination at the international, regional, and national levels, and between institutions, will minimize inadvertent conflicts between environmental policies and measures and between different international regimes.

The key to developing a strong integrated approach to sustainable development is the identification of the inherent *synergies* that exist between different aspects of the environment and an exploration of the potential for more effective *coordination* between sustainable development issues and their responses.

Inter-linkages asserts, as well, not only systemically dynamic responses to environmental problems but also a cooperation between societal institutions (government, laws, attitudes and behaviors, civil society), which catalyze such responses, that reproduce the complexity and dynamics of ecosystems functioning or their failure.

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.

In response to these identified needs, the UNU has initiated a three-year programme aimed at creating a broader and deeper understanding of each area identified in the Report. The programme is divided into three main categories, namely, framework building, capacity building and dissemination. Activities focussing on the five research areas identified in the Report are intended to contribute to the development of model implementation frameworks at the regional and national level.

The focus of the initiative is to see if taking into consideration the natural synergies that exist between issues can derive more effective and efficient solutions. This also includes the minimization of conflicts and the harmonization of policies and solutions.

National Actions Key to Implementation of Inter-Linkages

Given the inter-linked nature of the issues addressed by the MEAs, greater synergy in the implementation of the agreements should be beneficial. At present at the regional and global scales show significant progress on direct inter-linkages among MEAs, including the extensive use of MOU arrangements and joint work programs between MEA Secretariats. It is important to understand that the main thrust of these secretariats is to implement their respective MEAs and inter-linkages can help achieve this goal. There is strong incentive for inter-linkages – secretariats respond to the requests from parties and obtain benefits from greater inter-linkage with other bodies in achieving their goals. For some small MEA Secretariats, the use of the concept of inter-linkages is a must, as they can't function without creation of partnerships and without the cooperation with others to achieve their goals.

However, 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 most 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.

Linking Global to Local Issues and Vice Versa

Recently, there has been increasing pressure to meet MEA obligations efficiently and effectively at the national, and as an extension, at the local levels. But national coordination mechanisms have so far geared more towards satisfying MEA obligations, without serious effort to 'take the global message to the local level.' This is true at the local level too – the impact of local actions, activities and lifestyles do not take global impacts into consideration – and therefore global and MEA objectives not included in local projects and programmes.

In this sense, it is important to keep in mind the cyclical links between global environmental problems and their implications at the local level. Besides the horizontal inter-linkages between MEAs, and between MEAs and other regimes, it is imperative to understand the links between the problems addressed by the MEAs and their local implications – both in terms of their *contribution* to the problem, and being affected by the problem. Also, the solutions to solving the problems have a clear local starting point.

There is also a need to create an environment to facilitate subsidiarity of decision-making. The level and type of decisions taken have to match with the scale at which it happens, and this has long term implications for empowerment of communities – the ability to decide for themselves those aspects that affect their everyday lives. Creating an environment that facilitates such subsidiarity is a challenge indeed for local governments and the stakeholders they work with.

Also, there is also a need to understand the policies, programmes, projects and plans at the local level that address national objectives and obligations of several/multiple MEAs, including understanding the economic consequences of MEA obligations.

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 eco-systems approach to sustainable development issues. For example, countries should try to understand how national planning processes for the implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) could be mainstreamed into national development activities, taking into account interrelationships among different MEAs.

It is with this purpose that the UNU is attempting to develop a framework for the use of Inter-linkages in national implementation of MEAs.

A Framework for National Implementation of Inter-linkages

Significant challenges involved in effective inter-linkages at national and sub-national level

Taking into consideration the fact that the present system is complex and inter-linked, there is obviously a need to look at a number of case studies that will consider the practical (institutional, financial, historical, political, capacity-related, etc.) gaps and opportunities in the implementation of MEAs. Before this can be done, however, we must first consider the state of the present system. Some concepts include:

- Too much focus on structure, not function, on rule making, not implementation;
- There are both segregated and divergent approaches (mainly segregated approaches) that lead to both to conflicts, lost opportunities but also to practical and real solutions;
- The present system is hard to understand and difficult to change due to its nature and historical development, that very few people really fully comprehend or understand;
- Related to this, the bounds (historical, political, practical Limits) are never really understood nor studied, and thus, no moves are undertaken to consider them in the development, negotiation and implementation of agreements.

The concept also has its disadvantages, which include:

- Many national experts point out that the inter-linkages concept assumes more capacity in national governments than may exist. Right now, there are significant capacity constraints even to deal with the separate MEAs, much less the inter-linkages. If greater emphasis is given on inter-linkages, then this could lead to people being in meetings all the time rather than implementing conventions;
- Also, many governments are insecure with respect to their own legitimacy and unlikely to invest the effort needed for synergetic implementation of MEAs. For example, there may be tension involved in the idea of inter-linkages since many governments seek to devolve authority to gain greater legitimacy yet the inter-linkages concept would centralize greater authority;
- Also, incentives (e.g., financial, etc.), may sometimes promote independent action rather than synergy/harmonized action;
- Those negotiating agreements may also not be involved in the implementation of the agreements that they have negotiated;
- Even if there is a willing and capable group of people within a national government to utilize Inter-linkages, in the end, there may be a shortage of data and information that truly addresses the "inter-linkages" among issues (i.e., what data exist are generally collected sectorally);

- Finally, to use a regional approach to inter-linkages, it becomes a precondition that countries within a region have all ratified the MEAs that are to be inter-linked.

Core 'principles' for identifying opportunities for inter-linkages at the national level

In order to succeed, the case studies should take into consideration the following core principles at the national level:

- Proposed inter-linkages should clearly be in the national interest – inter-linkages could undermine negotiated agreements if they divert attention, resources from agreed on problems;
- The approach should focus on implementation. The 'goal' of efforts to promote inter-linkages should be to help countries pursue sustainable development in all its economic, social, and environmental dimensions. There needs to be a clarification of the links between MEA implementation with sustainable development. This would involve the internalization of MEA policies in national development strategies. There should also be a shift of focus from rule making to implementation;
- Proposed inter-linkages should have substantial value added – synergies for synergy sake will simply bog people down in meetings. High value added opportunities are likely to exist at all stages from negotiation, to development of national strategies, implementation of strategies, reporting and monitoring, etc.
- Although the project is focused on MEAs, the reality is that opportunities for helpful inter-linkages exist across both agreements focused on related issues (e.g., the environmental agreements) and agreements focused on related tools/approaches. Thus, inter-linkage opportunities should be explored with agreements such as trade agreements or agreements that rely on similar enforcement mechanisms such as the involvement of Interpol, or International Customs (e.g., transboundary chemical movements, CITES, ozone)
- Not all inter-linkages are best promoted/established at a national government level – regional or international agencies sometimes can play an important role in fostering inter-linkages at a national level without adding greater burden to national governments.
- Different "inter-linkages" issues arise across different levels (global, regional, national, local) and at different stages (planning, implementation, monitoring) and the actions need to be tailored to these specific needs.
- Focus on capacity building and national system facilitation, particularly integrated capacity building
- Focus on function rather than structure (principles of issue management).
- Follow regional standards/norms

Possible Thematic Value-added Opportunities to Promote Inter-linkages at the National or Regional Level

There are various thematic clusters that can be identified that will provide value-added opportunities for the promotion of inter-linkages at the national and regional levels. A number of these functional clusters include:

Policy, strategy and planning

- One of the core requirements of effective governance is the existence of policy or strategy in approaching any issue. In the negotiation, ratification and implementation of MEAs, the mainstreaming of issues with a countries own development framework is necessary in order to develop clear strategies with regard to any particular MEA. In a number of

countries, the challenge is in bridging this gap of national interest in development and MEA issues, in order to clarify strategies and policy.

- In many countries, for example, currently, inter-MEA communication is focused extensively on reporting. However, it would be more useful if extensive communication also occurs at the policy and strategy development stage. The actual implementation of particular MEAs need not be linked and can be done by separate agencies, but it is key that the planning and strategy development is done jointly.
- Moreover, at the policy and strategy stage, opportunities exist for governments to play an agenda setting role in the MEAs. Currently countries spend their time reacting to demands of conventions and the ‘inter-linkages’ discussions focus on how to enable countries to be more efficient in their response to those demands. Instead, the goal of inter-linkages should be to expand opportunity for agenda setting among countries.
- At present, most national governments don’t see MEAs as central to their development concerns and don’t have the incentive to work on inter-linkages. But, taken together, the set of issues addressed by MEAs are unquestionably of importance for development. There is therefore an opportunity for regional institutions to help promote this perspective and educate and communicate the importance to the public and other ministries outside of the Environment sector.

Capacity Building

- Probably the biggest challenge right now with regards to national implementation of MEAs is the lack of capacity and the need for capacity building.
- Capacity in this sense includes physical capacity, or the number of people that are actually involved in the negotiation and implementation of MEAs, the capability of this capacity, both the knowledge and capability to analyze information and the availability of information, and sustainability of this capacity, in terms of continuity and transfer of know how.
- Capacity building not only affects the level of response and effectiveness of implementation of MEAs, but it also affects the level of negotiation and ratification capacity of countries.
- In most countries, field training means actual negotiations itself, and flexibility means single-handedly managing all MEA issues. Although this promotes the development of “super-delegates” and “super-bureaucrats” that are knowledgeable in multiple issues and are thus best positioned to identify inter-linkages, serious issues arise when such personnel leave government service, particularly if there are no transfer of know how and information to those left behind.
- Capacity building should be thematic and institutional. A thematic approach is necessary for ensuring that synergies that exist in particular areas – such as the cluster of MEAs that relate to energy, or the cluster that relates to biodiversity protection — are identified and utilized. An institutional approach is necessary to ensure that knowledge and capacity are sustained.
- Capacity building on MEAs should also be forward looking, and should seek to raise awareness of upcoming MEA negotiations, and assist national governments to identify Inter-linkages between these new initiatives and existing MEAs.

Information and data

- Data and information assembled to address issues in the context of one MEA can often be useful in the context of others. Better access to data/information along with enhanced capacity to handle that information. Information exchange needs to be multi-agency and

multi-level rather than each agency level duplicating others. Regional/international bodies can help.

- Harmonization of data management systems and harmonization in the methodologies used can also aid inter-linkages. (E.g., not all conventions need to define 'wetlands' the same way, but the data systems should be constructed in a fashion that enables any definition to be used.)

Financial

- Availability of funds key in supporting inter-linkages. If present level of funding is not even enough for the proper implementation of individual MEAs, let alone their inter-linkages, then, opportunities for promoting efficiency together with effectiveness should be looked at using the inter-linkages approach.
- Just as the nature of funding sources provides an incentive for synergistic work at the international level, national governments could use the type of funds made available to promote synergy at a national level.
- Greater exploration is needed of ways for financing multipurpose projects.

Institutional Issues / Organizational Changes

- Opportunities exist by looking at which agencies negotiate and implements agreements and if, different, if there are enough transfer of information between them.
- In cases where multiple agencies are responsible for negotiation and implementation, consideration should be given to the possibility of one agency acting as lead agency, responsible for synergy or the establishment of an inter-agency committee to achieve this end.

Inter-linkages with non-MEAs

- Some of the greatest 'value added' opportunities may lie in addressing the inter-linkages with "non-environment" issues such as regional trade agreements, WTO, investment, health, labor, tourism, and others.

Inter-linkages among regions

- Actions taken within one regional grouping may ultimately be affected by actions taken or not taken within others. (E.g., Steps taken in other regions will affect sulfur control in Europe.) Inter-linkages are helpful both in providing models and capacity and in strengthening the capacity of each regional effort to reach its goals.

Framework Toolkit

The case study's framework approach for the conduct of the toolkit building will consist of three parts, namely the design phase, assessment and recommendation phase, and review. The design phase will use the operational concepts of clustering to identify priority areas for consideration within the case study. There are different ways at approaching clustering. These include:

- Issue or ecosystem based - Climate, bio-related, chemicals, trade-related, ocean
- Functional - Capacity building, information, meetings, assessment, etc.
- Impacts - Deforestation, land degradation, drought, etc.
- Goods - Agricultural products, industrial products, etc.

At the national level, it is best to focus on the functional aspects of clustering as it may provide the best opportunities for application. Although higher level of clustering would be

possible (institutional, legal, financial, etc.), usually, the lower the level we use, the better the opportunities for success. Low level in the sense of function such as focussed capacity building, information management and communications. This is because the lower levels would entail the lowest political baggage as there would be less bureaucracy, less cost and resources needed and would not divert the attention of the limited capacity that is presently available. A low-level approach would not necessarily mean that the “revolutionary” or high level approach would be totally ignored. Due to easy acceptance of a low-level approach, this would assist in dispelling the negative image of the concepts of “synergies” or “inter-linkages” and would thus assist the long-term and higher level approaches.

The design phase of the activity will enable us to narrow down the issues that need to be considered, and identify the needs and problems that actually exist in respective countries where the case studies will be done. The design phase will be initiated through national stakeholder meetings where problems, priorities, gaps and opportunities (including possible solutions) would be identified.

A pre-design phase, which will involve the determination of the possible issues and priorities of countries prior to the national stakeholder meetings, can be undertaken, which will involve the case study partners, which include the UNU, SPREP, country representatives, and consultants identified to conduct the major part of the studies.

After the design phase, the study will move into an assessment phase where the specific status related to scientific, institutional, political conditions (as necessary) are determined through consultations and research. The design phase would provide a narrower focus to the assessment phase, where only relevant issues would be considered.

Based on the design and assessment, analysis are made and a number of possible policy options are put forward at 3 levels. This would include options for the same national issue but tackled at the national, regional and international levels.

After coming up with a number of possible solutions, it is now left for the countries to adopt a certain number of these options or not at all.

In order to improve the approach, it would be necessary to determine if implementation does or does not proceed, the reasons behind of such outcomes. If only one of a number of solutions is actually implemented, then why it is so and why were the other rejected, and so on.

National and Regional Case Studies: Identifying Gaps and Opportunities

The real challenge would be in identifying the gaps and opportunities that exist within countries that influence the effective implementation of various MEA's. These could be political, financial, lack of capacity, legal based or others. In order to make the Inter-linkages concept more “real” for the agencies involved, it would be useful to implement pilot activities focused on specific sites and issues and which address social, economic, as well as environmental dimensions and will promote sustainable development. Such activities might involve projects focused on important watersheds, wetlands, CDM projects, transboundary movement of pollutants, etc.

The objectives of the case studies are to:

- a) Assess the benefits and costs (monetized) of implementation of MEAs. Assumption that they are costly and a burden needs to be challenged with data.
- b) Focus on a country or region specific issue that will be relevant to the area. For the Pacific Islands, this would be hazardous and domestic waste issue. The reason for the selection of the topic includes the ratification and implementation of the Waigani Convention and the Basel Convention by Island States in the Pacific Region. Also, the Ministers of the Environment of the Pacific Island States (Guam 2000) decided that hazardous wastes are a priority for the region.
- c) Study barriers to national attempts at inter-linkages. In some cases attempts by governments to pursue inter-linked approaches run into obstacles by donors or others. A study of these barriers would be helpful.
- d) The study will also look at existing design of financial mechanisms at the regional level to identify opportunities for changes in their design and implementation that would promote greater synergy.
- e) Study the usability of the framework approach to Inter-linkages that is described above.

Pacific Islands Case Study

The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) in collaboration with the United Nations University (UNU) is presently conducting case studies on Inter-linkages: Synergies and Coordination among Multilateral Agreements. The case studies will be carried out at the national level focusing on the experiences of three member countries when implementing Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), the countries chosen represent the three principal Pacific Island environs; Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia.

MEAs have been identified as one of the leading areas for regional environmental cooperation, and in this respect SPREP serves to promote regional cooperation in the negotiation and implementation of MEAs. This study will therefore assist SPREP member countries in assessing the implementation of MEAs, identify constraints, and propose solutions especially in terms of the inter-linkages approach towards effective implementation of MEAs.

The UNU developed the inter-linkages initiative, a three year programme that commenced in 1999 aiming at providing input into the World Summit for Sustainable Development (Rio+10) through the identification of ways to promote a more integrated and comprehensive approach to MEAs negotiation, ratification and implementation. Such effort will require the strengthening of the institutional and legal framework of countries and will assist with the avoidance of overlap among instruments as well as possible contradictions.

Case studies have been recognized as the best means to provide concrete examples of how Inter-linkages principles may be operationalized at the policy as well as executive level. At the Informal Regional Consultation on Inter-linkages held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 26-27 February, 2001, members of a working group that focused on the exploration of Pacific Island case studies agreed: that the lack or weakness of national policies, legal and institutional arrangements and human resource capabilities are obstacles to effective negotiation, ratification and implementation of MEAs.

A goal therefore, should be to strengthen national governance structures within negotiation, ratification, and implementation of MEAs by using synergies and inter-linkages. It was agreed that this could best be achieved by carrying out case studies to examine the use of linkages in strengthening national governance structures, identify gaps and obstacles in the use of

synergies between MEAs and develop practical solutions for national governance structures while encouraging greater regional and international coordination.

The overall goal of conducting the case studies is to strengthen national governance structures and promote regional cooperation in the negotiation, ratification, and implementation of MEAs by identifying inter-linkages and synergies both between MEAs as well as between different national institutions involved in their implementation. The Study will cover policy priorities, strategy and planning, institutional and legal frameworks, financing, scientific mechanisms, capacity building, information and data, communications, networking, outreach, and stakeholder participation.

The Case Studies will be initiated with a preliminary assessment of existing national frameworks. Gaps and obstacles in the use of synergies and inter-linkages between MEAs in the negotiation, ratification and implementation process will be identified leading to the formulation of options, solutions and recommendations for follow up activities at the national, regional and global levels.

Results of the case studies, which would be made available by the end of August 2001, will be made available at the UNU web site (<http://www.unu.edu>).

ASEAN Case Study

One of the key areas of cooperation under the purview of the ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment (ASOEN) is promoting synergies, coordination and effective implementation of Multilateral Environment Agreements (AWGMEA). For this purpose, the ASOEN Working Group on Multilateral Agreements has been established to facilitate and implement activities in this area.

A Workshop on Inter-Linkages was held in Kuala Lumpur on 26 and 27 February 2001 to discuss the opportunities for synergetic implementation of Multilateral Agreements at the regional and national levels. The UNU, the ASEAN Secretariat, the Ministry of Environment of Japan, Malaysian Ministry of Science Technology and the Environment (MOSTE), Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) and other partners jointly organized the Workshop. During the Workshop a special session involving all ASEAN member countries was held to discuss opportunities and challenges for the synergetic implementation of MEAs in the ASEAN region. One of the recommendations of the workshop was to conduct an ASEAN case study. This recommendation was subsequently endorsed by the 4th Meeting of the AWGMEA held in Chiangmai, Thailand in March 2001.

Based on these recommendations, the ASEAN Secretariat, together with the UNU and UNEP ROAP will be undertaking a case study in the 10 ASEAN countries on the negotiation and implementation of MEAs and their inter-linkages.

The specific areas that will be covered in the case study include:

- a) An assessment of the status of ratification, implementation arrangements, and problems and constraints faced with the implementation of MEAs in ASEAN member countries.
- b) Based on this preliminary assessment, identify opportunities and constraints in promoting synergies in implementation of MEAs at the regional and national level.
- c) Draw up a proposal, taking into account the following case studies, incorporating suggestions for promoting synergies and effectiveness in implementing MEAs, including

needs and resources in terms of finance, capacity and technology transfer and institutional arrangements.

The study is expected to be finished by the end of 2001 and results will be disseminated from early 2002, in time for the CSD second and third sessions for the preparation of the WSSD.

Conclusions

Preliminary results coming out of the case studies point out to very alarming trends. First of these is the issue of capacity. Although physical capacity is the most widely quoted source of lack of effectiveness in dealing with MEAs, both at the negotiation and implementation level, more importantly, it is the lack of mainstreaming of the MEA policies within national sustainable development policies that seems to be the biggest issue that some of the case study countries now face. Although most of these results would not be fully confirmed until all of the national case studies are finished, it does provide us with a glimpse of what could be expected of the study.

Recently, there has been a lot of discussion of global environmental governance reform. These studies are well meaning and are important. However, if we consider the real problems faced by countries at the national and local levels with regard to the MEA issues, then it also becomes clear that of equal importance is regional and national environmental governance reform.

What also becomes clear is the need to look at ways where national governments could deal with the ever-increasing set of environmental issues that they have to deal with in an efficient and effective manner.

This paper outlined an approach called Inter-linkages that may possibly provide such an approach by linking issues together where appropriate. The approach also provides us with an insight to the real challenges that national policy-makers face when dealing with these issues. These insights in return can provide us with hints on how best to approach regional and global responses.

