World Summit for Sustainable Development
International Eminent Persons Meeting on

Inter-linkages
Strategies for bridging problems and solutions in the further implementation of sustainable development

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Overview

There was so little discussion concerning sustainable development during the Millennium Summit preparatory sessions of the General Assembly that the UN Secretary General noted in his report that it was surprising that so “little priority is accorded to these extraordinarily serious challenges for all humankind”.

For those who have been involved in the process, particularly in the follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), this was considered an alarming development. Many would argue that the lack of effort to address the principle of sustainable development is due to more pressing social and economic issues. Issues that are becoming the main priority for a majority of decision-makers around the world and as a result, environmental concerns are being pushed to the back seat. This has led the Secretary General to also note that “policy makers, perhaps drowned by other concerns, perhaps deliberately avoiding such tough choices, are giving the environment frighteningly low priority”, and that all too often environmental management “is viewed as a luxury, not a necessity”.

It is not that the issues have changed or the dangers diminished. In fact, in the five-year review of the Rio Conference, many countries found that a majority of unsustainable trends actually worsened compared to the way they were before the Rio Summit. It is simply that the context of these concerns has changed since then. The problems encountered and the solutions proposed now tend to be so complex and inter-twined that it is a big burden for countries and international institutions just to keep up. Recent environmental agreements, which have large economic undertones such as the Climate Change Convention’s Kyoto Protocol or possess human health and trade aspects such as, the Bio-Safety Protocol help to highlight the situation.

This is not to say that Rio has not been a catalyst for change. In fact, since UNCED, several countries have been successful in reducing pollution and resource use. The Summit was also instrumental in assisting institutional development, international consensus building, and public and private sector participation.

However, whether or not we take a dim prognosis of the developments since Rio, one thing remains clear, the real challenge that continues to remain is the need for the development of effective responses to the ever-increasing environmental challenges that loom ahead.

Preparing for the World Summit for Sustainable Development

A year before the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD), most experts agree that Sustainable Development still remains an unattainable promise, 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 these inter-linked problems. Due to some institutional, historical, financial or capacity reasons, 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 assist in the further implementation of Agenda 21, we need to fill the gap between our problem perception 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.

**The Inter-linkages Approach**

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 Inter-linkages Initiative**

The United Nations University convened the *International Conference on Inter-Linkages: Synergies and Coordination between MEAs* in July 1999 to assist in the development of a synergistic and coordinated approach to environmental policy making that takes into account existing inter-linkages between environmental issues. The conference’s main outcome was the
Inter-Linkages Report. This report outlines a series of recommendations on the promotion of inter-linkages between MEAs in the areas of harmonization of information systems and information exchanges, finance, issue management, scientific mechanisms, and institutions.

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 focusing 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.

To work effectively on developing inter-linkages, the concept must be understood for what it is, complex, multi-dimensional, and multi-level. Each of the different levels of analysis (international, regional and national) would be tackled in the Initiative, based upon the principle of subsidiarity.

The objective of UNU's activities on Inter-linkages are three fold:
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.

This would be done in a two-pronged approach that would combine leadership in the issue and promoting awareness and fostering partnership with others.

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.

WSSD International Eminent Persons Meeting on Inter-linkages

With this background, the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) “International Eminent Persons Meeting on Inter-linkages - Strategies for Bridging Problems and Solutions to Work Towards Sustainable Development” is being organized to ponder on the issues that would lead up to the WSSD in 2002. This meeting would bring together 40 of the worlds thinkers, experts, eminent scholars and practitioners and policy makers to discuss, within two days, the linkages between issues and the challenges posed by these linkages.

The purpose of the meeting would be:
1) To review the state of the environment based on holistic linkages between issues;
2) To look at the problems and challenges that have risen due to these linkages;
3) To see how these issues could be best included within the ongoing WSSD preparatory processes.

The main issues that would be discussed at the meeting are:
1) The linkages between the chapters of Agenda 21 with particular attention given to the linkages between globalization and sustainable development;
2) The linkages between responses to these identified problems, particularly Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA’s); and
3) Strategies for the further implementation of sustainable development.

As one of its concrete outputs, the meeting will produce a Policy Brief that will be submitted in the official ongoing WSSD process at the regional and international levels.
Methodology

The expert meeting will be divided into three distinct but interrelated sessions. The event will commence with a series of presentations that outline concepts, ideas, and issues related to Inter-linkages between the chapters of Agenda 21, sustainable development and synergies between MEAs to Inter-linkages.

The second session of the meeting will start in the afternoon of the first day. Participants will be divided into working groups according to their area of interest and expertise. The goals and objectives of each working group are outlined within the following section of this proposal.

Based on the findings of the working group sessions, the third workshop session will serve as a forum to broaden discussion among all workshop participants. Chairs representing each working group will present the findings of each discussion. Based on the discussion and feedback from the participants and an expert panel discussion, the draft proposals and recommendations will be revised and finalized into a single document, detailing the proceedings of the workshop.