



UNU "Interlinkages Initiative" Aims at Coherent Sustainable Development

by Jerry Velasquez

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 attentions 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. 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 institu-

tions 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

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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 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.

Institutions

The essential parts of national mechanism are regional and sub-regional institutions, which can take global environmental issues and refocus them into priorities and manageable agendas for national governments. Synergies be-

tween 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 eco-systems approach to sustainable devel-

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Environment and Development

A Three-Decade Timeline

1972: The first world conference on the Environment (in Stockholm) urges creation of *UN Environment Programme* (UNEP). This begins the institutionalization of international environmental policy-making, a process that remains focused for two decades mainly on the conservation and management of natural resources.

1992: The Rio *Earth Summit* adopts *Agenda 21*, firmly linking 'environment' and 'development' issues and putting in place the basis for an integrated approach to "sustainable development."

1995: UNEP Governing Council calls for a report on the state of the global environment that takes into account the socio-economic, developmental and political institutional nexus.

1997: UNEP issues the first "*Global Environmental Outlook*," a cross-sectoral analysis of core concerns, identifying environmental trends, regional concerns and perspectives. A *Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise the Progress on Agenda 21* calls on the *Commission on Sustainable Development* to increase cooperation with regional organizations to promote implementation of *Agenda 21*. It also calls for greater cooperation among the conference of the parties to conventions related to sustainable development. A UNDP convenes expert meeting on "Synergies between the Convention on Biological Diversity, Climate Change, Desertification and Forestry Principles".

1998: "*Protecting our Planet Securing Our Future*," a report produced by the World Bank, UNEP and NASA, highlights linkages among the issues of climate change, biodiversity, land degradation, desertification, ozone depletion, fresh and marine water degradation, deforestation, and persistent organic pollutants. A task force established by the Secretary-General to review existing UN structures and arrangements in the field of the environment and human settlements concludes that substantial overlaps and unrecog-

nized 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.

A 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.

1999: UNU and UNEP organize an "*International Conference on Inter-linkages: Synergy and Coordination between Multilateral Environmental Agreements*." It looks at how financial mechanisms can be used to harmonize information systems and exchanges, how cross-sector issues can be managed, the more effective use of scientific mechanisms, and institutional reforms.

Subsequently, the UNU inter-linkages initiative is launched, a three-year program (2000-2002) to promote synergies and coordination between multilateral agreements and institutions. A Working Party of the *OECD Development Assistance Committee* (DAC) identifies the unique requirements of cooperation among the Conventions on *Climate Change*, *Desertification*, and *Biodiversity*, the synergies between them, and the policy and operational implications for donors.

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. ❖

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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.

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.

But stronger governance can not reduce the complexity of the interactive chains of cause and effect that link the earth’s ecosystems and human activities. Nor will it ease the difficulties of reaching a consensus on action, even when there is clear evidence of looming danger. Climate change, for example, will affect every major natural and societal system in the world. Soil fertility and crop yield patterns will change, as will land use, with an inevitable impact on the world’s food security and on human and animal nutrition. The timing and ex-

tent of infectious disease outbreaks will change, with broad health ramifications. The effects will be felt in mortality rates, economic activity, biodiversity and food production. Despite this grim prospect, action on climate change has been extremely slow.

One of the obstacles to coordinated and effective action is that the interface of science and politics is infused with a range of ethical and political considerations. It is science that “makes the environment speak,” but differences in political and economic power of national and social groups can dramatically change what policy makers will hear and act upon. As a result, negotiators often isolate issues that are inseparable in nature. The outcome of negotiations is determined not by the needs of sustainable development or considerations of practical “manageability” but by the different economic and political constituencies that must be served. The involvement of different ministries or functional organizations and the interplay of a mul-

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. The objective of the survey is to deepen understanding of the patterns of implementation and identify potential areas of synergy between the Rio instruments.

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 regional surveys and a December 2000 regional consultation 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 amalgamate 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

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titude of public and private special interests, tend to further obscure the interconnected nature of issues and goals. **Moving to Defragment**

Despite these many obstacles, States parties to existing environmental conventions have been actively trying to counter the fragmentation of approach and effort. Parties to the conventions dealing with Biological Diversity, Migratory Species, CITES, (endangered animals), RAMSAR (wetlands), and World Heritage, have supported closer links, including signed collaboration agreements between the secretariats. There is now a joint convention web site. Some are also beginning to push for collaboration beyond the issue of biodiversity. States parties to the Ramsar Convention have recognized the impact of wetlands on climate change, land degradation, and desertification. Recognition of the inextricable link between climate change, ozone depletion, and the Kyoto Protocol’s regulation of greenhouse gases has led to the initiation of formal cooperation between the bodies established under the Climate and Ozone Conventions. ❖

program to implement the *Interlinkages Initiative* and review the activities of other agencies, programs, organizations, and governments. Although primarily focused on influencing the *Rio+10* process, the *Inter-Linkages Initiative* will be important in how the world conceptualizes and implements sustainable development in the future.

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opment 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. Although the benefits of this approach would be immediately visible within national planning frameworks, there are also benefits in the multilateral arena (e.g. in grant or assistance recipient countries, this will help ensure that donor conditions reflect national priorities).

Capacity Building

Another critical issue is capacity building. This is because it 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. 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 interlinkages between these new initiatives and existing MEAs.

National governments, with the support of MEA secretariats, should initiate efforts to identify synergies and facilitate collaboration between MEAs. Capacity building at the national level, carried out by international institutions, should promote awareness of any specific inter linkages between. The promotion of synergy between national government activities and policies relating to MEAs should be based on a bottom up approach, moving from the local, to the national and the regional levels.