

Prospects for Rio+10
The Need for an Inter-linkages Approach to Global Environmental Governance

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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 United Nations University's Inter-linkages Initiative the objective of which is to explore the potential for a more integrated approach to environmental treaty making and environmental management. Currently in its first year of implementation, the 3-year Initiative targets the Rio+10 Summit as the output of its results. 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) or visit the Initiative web portal at <http://www.interlinkages.net/>.

Introduction

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. Key elements to this equation are the need for renewed commitment, effectiveness and efficiency of implementation in particular agreements that we are already parties to.

Renewed commitment is necessary among the international community if we expect to reap the real benefits of sustainable development. The urgency is not in finding solutions to new problems. The need lies within the effective implementation of agreed solutions to problems that were identified ten years ago. There is no longer an excuse for us to be caught off guard, which is still occurring with agreements such as the Ozone Convention. Due to the success of the convention, complacency has set in concerning the level of stratospheric ozone. Unfortunately, the situation continues to decline. The World Meteorologic Organization found that in the Arctic lower stratosphere (~10-22 km) the temperatures starting in early December 1999 until mid-March 2000 were consistently more than 4-5°C lower than the average of the last 30 years and stimulated the generation of polar stratospheric clouds, which facilitate ozone-destructive processes [WMO, 2000 (1)]. In its report of September 7, 2000 [WMO, 2000 (2)], the WMO also found that recent ground-based measurements from five Antarctic stations reporting overhead ozone amounts all show substantial decreases when compared to the pre-ozone hole norms [WMO, 1998].

Effective implementation is necessary at the very least in order to keep the environmental status quo. It is commonly known that the solutions developed to combat environmental problems today are at the most optimistic; targets only stabilization and basic preservation. Due to this, it has become more important that the solutions we come up with are fully and effectively implemented. Although, it is often argued that common pitfalls of many conventions prevent their full implementation, it is in any case a goal that we should strive for.

Finally, efficiency is necessary in order to deal effectively with the increasingly more complex web of international treaties, conventions, and agreements using an ever-shrinking resource and interest base. Twenty years ago, it had not been anticipated that ozone depletion was going to be such a big problem for the world. What the future holds for us in terms of environmental surprises is still a mystery. However, even without considering this trend, more and more issues are being forced into decision-makers agendas. Even with existing problems such as climate change, the solutions that we are coming up with (The Kyoto Protocol's flexible mechanisms) are more economic than environmental. This is exacerbated by the fact that increases in resources allocated to deal with these problems are generally not sufficient to keep up

with the pace of problems. For developing countries, the situation is amplified by the lack of local capacity to deal with issues.

If we are to succeed in an effective examination of our problems during the ten-year review of UNCED, there is obviously a need for a new approach towards environmental governance to incorporate these ingredients.

Promoting Effectiveness and Efficiency through Synergies

Although Rio provided us with the framework for dealing with various environmental topics, measures to effectively implement issues were never really made clear through the concept of sustainable development. Presently different stakeholders take advantage of synergies within single focussed themes such as regulated substances, animal and plant species, or ecosystems where coordination potential actually are most viable [FIELD, 1999] [Kimball, 1999].

The key to understanding problematic environmental issues is to recognize the fact that the global environment, in its entirety, is composed of complex and inter-linked, ecosystems and is naturally synergistic. This leads to the conclusion that a more efficient and more effective solution would be derived only if this factor were used to our greater advantage. However, the recognition that approaches to environmental protection and sustainable development must appreciate natural inter-linkages and synergies in the ecosystem is not sufficient in itself to ensure that this thinking will be instilled in the decision making processes. The main challenge for us therefore, is to ensure that where possible, holistic approaches are employed within negotiations and implementation of these agreements.

For the last 50 years, piecemeal and segregated approaches have predominated the negotiation and implementation of multilateral environmental agreements or MEAs. The result has been agreements that overlap, conflict, override each other, or at the least, does not take advantage of the synergies that would naturally have existed between them. Although the problem is evidently rampant in the environmental regime, the same issues are mirrored in other regimes as well (such international trade and investment).

There are several clear examples of this, most prominent being the HFC issue between the Ozone and Climate Change Conventions. By switching from CFCs to HFCs, which is a greenhouse gas, the Ozone Convention's solution became a problem for the Climate Change Convention. Another example is the Kyoto Protocol's discussion of sinks, which supports the use of timber plantations since they can significantly contribute to an increase in carbon absorption. However, large-scale planting of fast growing exotic species may result in the destruction of old forest ecosystems and severe biodiversity loss. Similarly, possible conflicts between the Climate Change Convention and its Kyoto Protocol and the WTO are well known and well documented [Campbell et al., 1998] [Chambers et al., 1999].

There are different levels where synergies can be implemented. At the international level, synergies in this context could mean co-ordination at the convention level. This could include improving co-operation between convention secretariats, scientific, and other governing bodies, minimising conflicts in basic agreements and taking

advantages of the lessons learned, from more advanced treaties. It is also at this level where the best chances exist for examining problems at their source, especially for “global issues” such as climate change and ozone depletion.

Then there is the regional level. At this level, through the examination of environmental impacts, possible synergies can be best attained. In reality, very few environmental impacts are global in nature. Even for climate change and ozone depletion, their influence mainly effects regional and trans-boundary levels [Watson et al., 1997]. Although there are a number of possible regional and sub-regional groupings, it is through an eco-systems approach that the best potential for looking at environment impacts exists. This is because predominant eco-systems tend to be regional by nature, systems such as river basins, seas/coastal marines systems, island chains, mountain ranges, and other geographic landforms are where the impacts of environmental degradation are greatest felt and where the potential exists for learning and developing holistic and comprehensive solutions.

Regional geographic systems tend to create impacts that are similar in scope and characteristic to each country within the region or within sub-region for some countries (such as China, Brazil and India). Also, environmental pollutants are often spread, through geographic mediums and conditions, creating common problems within given geographic regions.

At the national level, synergies could signify the pursuit of holistic negotiations of international agreements and effective implementation of treaties and conventions that the country is party to. Although coordination potential varies from country to country depending on economic size, institutional set-up, geographical location, politics and so on, coordination potential actually is most visible at this scale. It is also at the national level where possibilities for a more flexible approach to synergies could be attained. All too often national authorities are more open to the concept of synergistic solution to problems than international institutions, such as funding organizations and other international institutions [UNU, 2000].

The United Nations University Inter-linkages Initiative assumes the above approach. The Initiative is designed to look at the synergies between multiple issues, with the objective of promoting more effective and efficient implementation of environmental agreements, using an ecosystem approach guided by the principle of subsidiarity.

The UNU Inter-linkages Initiative

The United Nations University Initiative on Inter-linkages started with the International Conference on “Inter-linkages: Synergies and Coordination between Multilateral Environmental Agreements”, convened in 14-16 July 1999. The conference attracted a significant number of high level participants and representatives from a number of Environmental Secretariats, various members of the UN family, and the governments of concerned countries.

The main theme of the conference was the search for effective environmental management through the development of better-integrated management mechanisms, based on synergies that exist naturally within the global environment. The UNU organized the Inter-linkages conference with the aim of exploring the potential for a

more integrated approach to environmental treaty making and environmental management.

Even before the conference, the need for a more synergistic, integrated, approach to environmental management had been recognized and was already making its way into the institutional decision making process. Many agencies have taken the lead on this issue including the UNDP/Sustainable Energy and Environment Division (SEED) “Expert Meeting on Synergies in National Implementation between the Rio Agreements” (1997), the World Bank/NASA/UNEP report entitled “Protecting Our Planet Securing Our Future” (1998), and the UNEP/World Conservation Monitoring Center's “Feasibility Study for Information Management Infrastructure”, also 1997.

Calls for a more integrated approach are also beginning to emanate from within the UN system and at the executive level for a number of multilateral environmental agreements. At the Rio plus Five General Assembly Special Session (A/S-19/29, 27 June, 1997), for example, the Assembly adopted a report touching on issues of collaboration in regard to the implementation of the various Rio conventions. In the same year, in his Programme for Reform, the UN Secretary General, himself, highlighted the need for a more integrated, systematic, approach to policies and programmes. In 1998 the UN Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements endorsed these views when it determined that substantial overlaps, unrecognized linkages and gaps characterize current UN activities.

The UNU Inter-linkages conference's main outcome was the *Inter-Linkages Report* [UNU, 1999]. This report outlines a series of recommendations surrounding 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.

Since this conference, various inter-linkages related decisions have been taken at a number of MEA MOP/COPs (See CITES, UNFCCC, UNFCCC) and several MEA secretariats have initiated inter-linkages programmes and planning, most notably the River Basin Initiative between the Convention on Biodiversity and the Ramsar Convention.

National, regional and sub-regional initiatives have also started, of particular note are the “Integration and Synergy Programme” in the Republic of Kazakhstan and the “Central Asian Programme on Synergy” both run through the Regional Environmental Center of Central Asia, located in Kazakhstan. There is still, however, much work that needs to be undertaken with regard to this issue.

In response to these identified needs, the UNU has initiated a three-year programme, called the UNU Inter-linkages Initiative, aimed at creating a broader and deeper understanding of the issues. 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 Inter-linkages Report are intended to contribute to the development of model implementation frameworks at the regional and national level. Capacity building activities mainly target negotiators and other national delegates. Finally, our approach to dissemination is further divided into lectures and special events during MEA negotiations, publications of books and policy

briefs and dissemination via the Internet through the Inter-linkages web portal. A description of the Initiative is shown in Figure 1.

The objective of UNU's activities on inter-linkages are three fold: to develop understanding of the inter-linkages concept and demonstrate how it can be operationalized; to promote awareness between stakeholders of the benefits and gains of effectiveness and efficiency of the inter-linkages approach; and to propagate the implementation of inter-linkages between related environmental MEAs at the international, regional and national levels.

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) will be tackled in the Initiative, based upon the principle of subsidiarity. Regional and national framework building activities generated by the Initiative will be achieved in accordance with the ecosystem approach.

Specific activities of the Initiative that are now underway include:

1) Starting in July 2000, the UNU conducted a regional review of the implementation of a selection of environmental conventions (i.e., the Rio Conventions) as well as national efforts to link these conventions at the implementation level, starting in ESCAP countries in 2000. The objective of the survey is to deepen understanding of the patterns of implementation and identify potential areas of synergy between the Rio instruments. Other regional reviews are also planned in 2001.

2) To set the stage for the regional case studies, the UNU will convene a regional consultation in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in December 2000. The objective of this meeting is to identify and explore, among regional ecosystems, issues related to inter-linkages and examine implementation programmes supported by international bodies, UN Regional Commissions, MEA Secretariats, and other stakeholders would attend this meeting.

3) Starting in August 2000 in Malaysia, and by using an ecosystem approach, the UNU will conduct a series of national case studies that will examine a cluster of conventions (i.e. Rio Conventions) in order to observe issues and challenges to their implementation and their inter-linkages.

4) Starting in early 2001, the UNU will initiate a series of regional case studies based on an ecosystem approach. Starting with the results of the regional survey and regional consultation, the case studies are intended to examine issues relating to regional implementation of inter-linkages.

5) In late 2001, the UNU proposes to host a Global Thematic Consultation for Rio+10 in Tokyo, focusing on the issue of inter-linkages. This meeting will amalgamate and present findings such as recommendations developed through the different activities of the UNU Initiative and other similar activities.

6) In 2002, just before Rio+10, the UNU will convene a Second International Conference on Inter-linkages in order to assess the results of the three-year

programme, and highlight the activities undertaken by other agencies, programmes, organizations, and governments.

Specific activities now under way to address the five research areas identified in the Inter-linkages Report, which include:

1) Concerning *Information Harmonization* in the year 2000, the UNU Inter-linkages web portal will be set-up as a repository of links to a multitude of MEA and other institutional web sites. It will also include information on ongoing research and upcoming meetings on the issue. The site, which is located at www.interlinkages.net, will also serve as the prime dissemination tool for the UNU Initiative, where documents will be made available in electronic form.

2) Regarding *Issue Management*, several case studies will be undertaken. Each will be based on a set of selection criteria and will begin in 2000 until the end of 2001. Based on the predefined selection criteria, two issues have been identified, namely "Bio-safety: Policy Coherence within the CBD, the WTO and the Codex Alimentarius" and "Linkages between Ozone Layer Depletion and Global Warming". A parallel activity on linkages within land degradation issues is also underway.

3) Concerning *Institutions*, The UNU will undertake a "Study of Global Environmental and Sustainable Development Institutional Reform" in 2000. In early 2001, a policy brief on the proposed World Environment Court will be made.

4) Regarding *Finance*, starting in July 2000, the UNU will initiate a "Review of the State of Financing Systems and Mechanisms that Influence Inter-linkages". Special attention will be made to the examination of decentralized management, flexible programmes, resource flows, project evaluation, and the opportunity for innovative financing on inter-linkages. The UNU also proposes to host an informal meeting of funding bodies during the UN Conference on Finance and Development in South Africa in the fall of 2001.

5) For *Scientific Mechanisms*, The UNU will examine ways to implement the precautionary principle. The UNU will also try to make input into the ongoing Millennium Eco-systems Assessment (MA).

On capacity building, based on the recommendations made at the Inter-linkages conference, the UNU will carry out activities under three categories, namely, awareness building/dissemination of research; negotiation on MEAs, and the implementation of MEAs.

On awareness building, the UNU will focus on conducting training seminars in UN and UNU Centres (NY and Geneva) on different issues related to the Inter-linkages Initiative. The seminars will be open to UN accredited, NGOs, IGOs, observers, and to UN diplomats working in issue areas related to inter-linkages.

Regarding negotiation and implementation of MEAs, the UNU intends to use the *ENHANCE*[®] Initiative begun by the UNU/IAS in 1998. ENHANCE (Environmental Negotiators Hands On Capacity Building Exercise) is aimed at equipping least developing country (LDC) negotiators with the necessary knowledge and skills to

enable effective and meaningful participation in multilateral environmental negotiations using an Inter-linkages approach. It is proposed to organize a series of ENHANCE regional workshops (based on availability of resources) on the theme of inter-linkages.

The UNU approach to dissemination the results of its research is four-fold, including:

1. Production of academic peer reviewed books published through the UNU Press;
2. Production and distribution of concise and timely policy briefs targeting specific audiences;
3. Workshops, lectures and special events during official negotiations of MEAs, particularly those that are directly related to our specific research topics; and
4. Compilation of all results and useful information into electronic versions for the Internet, and disseminating these through the UNU Inter-linkages web portal.

The UNU's Initiative on Inter-linkages although primarily targeted towards Rio+10 will still play a strategic role after 2002. Priority among these possible areas of action includes the completion of the regional and national frameworks, initiated during Phase I of this programme. Although efforts will be exerted to cover as much areas of research and geographic regions as possible, it will be impossible to do so comprehensively for the first three phases of the programme due to limitations on time and funding. A second objective of the programme beyond 2002 will be to monitor the implementation of programme started through the Initiative. Although not a part of the present programme, we anticipate that a monitoring programme will be needed as more activities are initiated and implemented.

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Figure 1. Overall framework for the Inter-linkages Initiative

