

# Role of UNEP in Global Environmental Governance: A Reform Agenda

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## Abstract

*Environmental thinking and activism are steadily gaining widespread, even global acceptance, but are often in conflict with economic interests and international politics. Environmental priorities are further challenged by scientific uncertainty involving effects that in some cases will only become manifest far into the future. Nonetheless, accompanying this global environmental awakening has been an extraordinary number of international agreements on a wide range of critical environmental issues. On reform of global environmental governance intensify; the future of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has come into acute political focus. Many argue that the organization has faltered in its role as the UN's leading agency for the environment. This paper addresses about Global Environmental Governance (GEG), concept of UNEP Programme, UN development decades, Role of UNEP in Environmental Governance and its key objectives. Models of Global Environmental Governance Reform and elements of reform agenda has discussed in this article.*

**Keywords:** UNEP, Global Environmental Governance (GEG), UN, Elements of reform, Models of GEG

## Introduction

Global Environmental Governance (GEG) is the sum of organizations, policy instruments, financing mechanisms, rules, procedures and norms that regulate the processes of global environmental protection. Since environmental issues entered the international agenda in the early 1970s, global environmental politics and policies have been developing rapidly. [1] The environmental governance system we have today reflects both the successes and failures of this development. It has become increasingly clear that the GEG system, as we know it, has outgrown its original design and intent.

We are living in times when many people claim that there is no ensuring that generations to come might enjoy an ecologically balanced environment. The global scenario has indicated that environmental issues have long overcome territorial and geographical barriers, consisting currently of global issues, e.g. water scarcity, global warming, and ocean contamination.

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Although local actions have a significant influence on handling environmental conflicts, the primary role in elaborating public policies to be implemented is still the State's responsibility. These actions, in turn, are organized in higher structures, such as the United Nations (UN) and their interfaces, e.g. the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). [2]

Governing the planet's rich and diverse natural resources is an increasingly complex challenge. In our globalized world of interconnected nations, economies, and people, managing environmental threats, particularly those that cross political borders such as air pollution and biodiversity loss, will require new global, regional, national, and local responses involving a wide range of stakeholders. Effective environmental governance at all levels is critical for finding solutions to these challenges. Environmental governance therefore comprises rules, practices, policies, and institutions that shape how humans interact with the environment.

Environmental governance has been defined in several ways. Environmental governance is the whole range of rules, practices, and institutions related to management of the environment in its different forms (conservation, protection, exploitation of natural resources, etc.). All the processes and institutions, both formal and informal, that encompass the standards, values, behavior, and organizing mechanisms used by citizens, organizations, and social movements as well as the different interest groups are part of environmental governance in terms of accessing and using natural resources. Good environmental governance takes into account the role of all actors that impact the environment. [3]

From governments to NGOs, the private sector, and civil society, cooperation is critical to achieving effective governance that can help us move towards a more sustainable future. Environmental governance is the concept in political ecology and environmental policy which advocates sustainable development as the highest consideration for managing human activities. It assumes a desirable future state for human societies in which living conditions and resources meet human needs without undermining the sustainability of natural systems and the environment, so that future generations may also meet their needs.

## **Global Environmental Governance**

At the international level, global environmental governance is the sum of organizations, policy instruments, financing mechanisms, rules, procedures, and norms that regulate the processes of global environmental protection. United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) held at Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972 was a watershed in the emergence of sustainable development. [4] It adopted Action Plan on Human Development, which looked at the term "pollution of poverty" meaning environmental concerns of the poor, such as lack of clean water or sanitation.

The major institutional decision coming out of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm in 1972 was the establishment of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), which was created to play the lead role in global environmental governance (GEG) by coordinating environmental activities within the UN agencies and acting as a catalyst for new initiatives. Since then, the world has seen hectic activity in global environmental policy (and, more recently, in sustainable development policy) and a host of treaties, organizations, and mechanisms have emerged. [5]

Global environmental governance is understood as the sum of organizations, policy instruments, financing mechanisms, rules, procedures, and norms that regulates the processes of global environmental protection. Since environmental issues entered the international agenda in the early 1970s, global environment today reflects both the successes and failures of this development. [6] There is great awareness of environmental threats, and numerous

efforts have emerged to address them globally. At the same time – and partly because of the rather spectacular growth in awareness and initiatives – the GEG system has outgrown its original design and intent. The system's high maintenance needs, its internal redundancies, and its inherent inefficiencies have combined to have the perverse effect of distracting from the most important GEG goal of all-improved environmental performance. [7]

Even though the GEG system has achieved much in the way of new treaties, more money and a more participatory and active system than anyone might have imagined three decades ago, environmental degradation continues. Indeed, because we know so much more about environmental conditions and environmental processes, we also know more about what is not going well with the global environment. [8]

## **UN Development Decades**

A series of UN Development Decades were undertaken by the United Nations in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in order to raise awareness among the global community targeting development. [9] The First UN Development Decade in the 1960s prioritized economic growth and application of modern scientific and technical knowledge as route to prosperity in the underdeveloped world and development was expected to be “More like the West.” The Second UN Development Decade in 1970s followed the previous policy. Development was not shared equally among the populations of these nations. It was thought underdevelopment was the direct outcome of development elsewhere. In 1980s, the Third UN Development Decade criticized overemphasizing of the economic dimensions of development. Development needed to be sustainable. “Development” in contrast was seen as a multidimensional. [10]

It was expected that development should encompass not only economic and social activities but also development of the habitat and the environment. The Fourth UN Development Decade in the 1990s aimed at developing a process that is responsive to social needs, sought a significant reduction in extreme poverty, promoted the development and utilization of human resources and skills. It put emphasis on economic growth in the developing countries, especially in the LDCs. UN Development Decades set the tone of a holistic development addressing all six aspects of a multidisciplinary development: economic, social, ecological, political, cultural, and spiritual. [11]

## **UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme**

United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) established in 1972 is a watchdog body to ensure that the MEAs are implemented by the signatory countries in their respective localities. UNEP has been playing a leading role as a global environmental authority. From delivering expert scientific assessments to providing international platform for negotiations and decision making, UNEP has been fulfilling this mandate since 1972. The country-parties (signatory states) of the MEAs are expected to implement these conventions, treaties, and protocols at national level by redrafting their national plans and policies and enactment of legislation in line with the MEAs. Conference of Parties (COP) being the supreme body of these conventions meet periodically (e.g., Conference of Parties of UNFCCC are held annually). [12]

Although UNEP with its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, does not hold much influence these days over the implementation processes of various MEAs because of establishment of independent secretariats (e.g., UNFCCC secretariat in Bonn, Germany; CBD secretariat in

Montreal, Canada), the organization was the pioneer UN agency in upholding the cause of environmental governance globally. [13]

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the leading environmental authority in the United Nations system. UNEP uses its expertise to strengthen environmental standards and practices while helping implement environmental obligations at the country, regional and global levels. UNEP's mission is to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. [14]

## Six Areas of Concentration

UNEP re-organised its work programme into six strategic areas as part of its move to results based management. The selection of six areas of concentration was guided by scientific evidence, the UNEP mandate and priorities emerging from global and regional forums. [15]

**1. Climate change** UNEP strengthens the ability of countries to integrate climate change responses by providing leadership in adaptation, mitigation, technology and finance. UNEP is focusing on facilitating the transition to low-carbon societies, improving the understanding of climate science, facilitating the development of renewable energy and raising public awareness.

**2. Post-Conflict and Disaster Management** UNEP conducts environmental assessments in crisis-affected countries and provides guidance for implementing legislative and institutional frameworks for improved environmental management. Activities undertaken by UNEP's Post-Conflict & Disaster Management Branch (PCDMB) include post-conflict environmental assessment in Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Lebanon, Nigeria and Sudan.

**3. Ecosystem Management** Facilitates management and restoration of ecosystems in a manner consistent with sustainable development, and promotes use of ecosystem services. Examples include the Global Programme of Action (GPA) for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities.

**4. Environmental governance** UNEP supports governments in establishing, implementing and strengthening the necessary processes, institutions, laws, policies and programs to achieve sustainable development at the country, regional and global levels, and mainstreaming environment in development planning.

**5. Harmful substances** UNEP strives to minimize the impact of harmful substances and hazardous waste on the environment and human beings. UNEP has launched negotiations for a global agreement on mercury, and implements projects on mercury and the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) to reduce risks to human health and the environment.

**6. Resource efficiency/sustainable consumption and production** UNEP focuses on regional and global efforts to ensure natural resources are produced, processed and consumed in a more environmentally friendly way. For example, the Marrakesh Process is a global

strategy to support the elaboration of a 10-Year Framework of Programs on sustainable consumption and production.

## **UNEP's Role in Environmental Governance and Key Objectives**

### **The UNEP vision and understanding of environmental governance**

UNEP describes environmental governance as the global, regional, national and local responses to manage environmental threats. Effective governance is considered critical for finding solutions to trans-boundary challenges such as air pollution and biodiversity loss. [16] The UNEP vision of environmental governance is a world where:

- States can craft environmental policies based on up to date, accurate information on emerging issues and the state of the global environment,
- Environmental sustainability is an integral part of all national development planning, helping to reduce poverty and increase long term security for vulnerable populations,
- States cooperate effectively on the global stage, developing international agreements that move us closer to a sustainable future, and,
- States enter into lasting and effective strategic alliances with major groups and stakeholders to achieve common goals and objectives (UNEP)

### **Key Objectives of UNEP in Environmental Governance**

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) annually organizes events for World Environment Day, which encourages worldwide awareness and action for the protection of the environment. It is celebrated on 5 June in over 100 countries. The theme for World Environment Day 2020 is, "Time for Nature", with a focus on its role in providing the essential infrastructure that supports life on Earth and human development. This focus is expected to provide an opportunity for driving the momentum and public awareness of nature as a key aspect in the lead up to the 15th meeting of the Parties (COP 15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). COP 15 was expected to take place in October 2020, but will be rescheduled for 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. [17]

UNEP offers four core services to help States meet the challenges of environmental governance: (UNEP)

- Access to sound science for decision-making: Global environmental assessment of state, trends and policy options; connecting scientific networks to policymakers; guidance to countries on environmental review.
- International cooperation; Promoting cooperation on environmental policy; aligning international laws and standards with UN law, review goals, targets and commitments; setting the global environmental agenda through ministerial for a and the GC/GMEF.
- International policy setting and technical assistance: helping governments further develop and strengthen judicial, political and legal systems; engaging stakeholders in strategic partnerships.
- National Development Planning: develop and strengthen institutional arrangements for management of shared natural resources and trans-boundary environmental issues; technical and financial support to integrate environmental sustainability into national policy and budgeting (PEI); integrate principles of environmental sustainability across UN development assistance.

## Models of Global Environmental Governance Reform

Improving global environmental governance has been an issue of dynamic debate in academic and policy-making circles ever since environmental issues entered the international agenda in the 1970s. [18] Since then, both environmental threats and international responses to them have increased in their number and complexity. The key challenge of global environmental governance has, however, remained the same:

how to design an institutional framework (system) that would best protect the global environment.

1. The Compliance Model
2. The New Agency Model
3. Upgrading UNEP Model
4. Organizational Streamlining Model
5. Multiple Actors Model

## Elements of A Reform Agenda

Any calls for GEG reform should begin with recognition of—indeed, a celebration of—the important strides made by global environmental policy over the last three decades. Having said that, there is a clear and urgent need for global environmental governance reform. Such reform is most likely to be effective if it comes along with system-wide UN reform. [19]

While the need for reform is urgent, the reform agenda need not be drastic. There is much in the GEG system that does, in fact, work well. Moreover, there are a number of encouraging trends that can, and should, be built upon. In short, the system need not be entirely dismantled to be rebuilt. However, this is not to propose merely cosmetic change. Instead, it is to suggest that the reform agenda should strengthen those elements of the GEG system that do work, while at the same time targeting a limited number of the most critical challenges and deficiencies. Conceptually, as well as strategically, the need is for a small but targeted agenda of reform that is both doable and worth doing.

In order to be meaningful, a reform agenda should not only be targeted at the most important challenges and concerns, but should also be contextualized within a larger and longer-term vision of what the eventual state of the GEG system should be like. While the immediate steps should be identified with an eye on that which is desirable and doable, the ultimate goals of the reform agenda should be more ambitious and should be clearly in sight. Ultimately, all GEG efforts must be for the purpose of improving the actual state of the global environment. Having a longer-term vision of the direction that we want the GEG system to move in will not only allow us to identify the short-term measures that might begin moving the system in that direction, but should also help us in evaluating the progress towards those goals, and making any course corrections that might be necessary. [20]

Five goals, in particular, stand out as being particularly important and command broad-based support:

- **Goal #1. Leadership.** The GEG system should grasp the attention and visible support of high-profile political leaders. The key institutions within the system should be managed by leaders of the highest professional calibre and international repute; all working together towards the best interests of the GEG system as a whole.

- **Goal #2. Knowledge.** Science should be the authoritative basis of sound environmental policy. The GEG system should be seen as A knowledge-based and knowledge-producing system.

- **Goal #3. Coherence.** GEG should operate as a coherent “system” with reasonable coordination, regular communication and a shared sense of direction among its various elements.

- **Goal #4. Performance.** The institutions that make up the GEG system should be well-managed; they should have the resources they need and should use these resources efficiently; and they should be effective in implementation. The ultimate purpose of the GEG system is to improve the global environmental condition.

- **Goal #5. Mainstreaming.** The GEG system should seek to incorporate environmental concerns and actions within other areas of international policy and action, and particularly so in the context of sustainable development.

These goals can be the basis of a shared global vision for the global environmental governance system. While many different ideas have been proposed for the reform of the GEG system, most of them seek to actualize some or all of these goals in various ways. Indeed, there are many different pathways that could be adopted to arrive at these goals.

One set of pathways and a set of practical recommendations for how the GEG system may be better aligned with these goals. It should also be noted that although the recommendations are divided broadly around the five major goals identified above, many of them overlap and have multiple benefits.

## Conclusion

Environmental governance continues to face many challenges locally, nationally, and globally. Although the global community endorsed the view that global warming is taking place and gave emphasis on promotion of renewable energy discarding fossil-fuel based energies, many developed countries continue to use fossil fuels in a big way for their energy use. Group interests, regional interests take priority over global interests.

Unanimous support to “Paris Agreement” at Paris in 2015 faces new challenges with the change of government. Petty local interests getting priority over national and global interests.

At a national level, new regime refuses to honor global commitments made by the past regimes, some governments are found to be serving the interests of some coterie groups and putting more emphasis on fossil fuels, like coal and petroleum at the cost of environment-friendly renewable energy. Some global leaders are taking benefit of scientific disagreements and continue to harness natural resources to a point of no return.

The crises caused by accelerated and probably irrevocable impact of human activities on the nature, society, and economy calls for collective responses by international institutions, governments, and citizens. Governance, considered as the pluralist management of policies and social and environmental actors, has to meet this crisis by pooling the experience and knowledge of each of the social agents and institutions concerned. Through continuous and concerted efforts with strong political will and commitment, one could overcome such crises. Public awareness through media advocacy and education can help develop a strong constituency in order to establish the desired political will for a change.

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