

Sustainable Development Governance

Will Rio+20 finally agree to upgrade UNEP to a UN Environment Agency?

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Deforestation in Brazil and the over-exploitation of the High Seas are two powerful reminders that what we urgently need is better governance of the environment, globally. Governments must put the regulations in place that are needed for the public good and give the institutions tasked to implement sustainable development the tools to do so. It sounds simple, but it does mean changing some fundamentals in the way we govern our planet.

The “institutional framework for sustainable development” is one of the two official themes of the Rio+20 Summit based on a UN General Assembly resolution agreed in December 2009. Governments and experts all agree that sustainable development governance is not effective. There are many institutions dealing with social agendas or the environment, but they are not coordinated, lack adequate powers, and are much weaker than economic and trade bodies – such as the World Trade Organisation – that can impose punitive fines on members flouting their rules.

The main *international* forum established in 1992 to deal with “sustainable development” is the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The CSD was tasked to monitor the implementation of Agenda 21, the main outcome document of Rio 1992. Sadly the CSD, which convened for two weeks every year since Rio, was never more than a talking shop. It could do nothing to actually deliver sustainable development. At best, it has been at times a forum where new ideas have been shared.

A new Sustainable Development Council

During the negotiations for Rio+20 a new Sustainable Development Council (SDC) has been proposed by many countries. Based along the lines of a Human Rights Council, the SDC would have enhanced functions compared to the CSD, and would aim to engage leaders at the highest level. Others have suggested upgrading the CSD, or expanding the function of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) so that it would monitor sustainable development goals.

Greenpeace is convinced that the CSD does not have a future. Ultimately, “sustainability” needs to be at the core of all – and especially the most influential – decision-making bodies. A Sustainable Development Council could be a step forward, but it needs to be given real authority and teeth so as not to suffer the same fate as the CSD.

The future of UNEP

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) was created as a compromise at the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment in 1972. Many attempts have been made since then to strengthen it. But while we have a UN agency for tourism, UNEP remains a mere Programme, meaning that financial contributions to UNEP by states remain voluntary and UNEP does not have access to the UN core budget.

Governments should agree at Rio+20 to upgrade the UN Environment Programme to specialised agency status. Sustainable development governance needs a global authority on the environment, which should have much enhanced implementation, compliance and enforcement mechanisms. There is a clear majority of countries that support upgrading UNEP.

UNEP aims to deliver “the environment for development” and has worked very hard since its creation in 1972 to become relevant and supportive to the needs of developing countries. Strengthening UNEP could contribute to global development efforts, not distract from them. The environment is, after all, the essential base for all development. No wonder, therefore, that African Heads of States have endorsed the upgrading of UNEP as one of the outcomes of Rio.

But for sustainability to thrive, we need much more than a strengthening of existing institutions. At Rio, governments must address the glaring gaps in oceans governance and agree to negotiate a High Seas Biodiversity Agreement under the UN Convention of the Law of the Seas.

We need global rules that change power and investment dynamics. Environmental regulations (including Multilateral Environmental Agreements) need much stronger sanction mechanisms; they need the ability to effectively penalise countries such as Canada, for example, who simply ignore the commitments they made under the Kyoto Protocol. We also urgently need global rules on corporate accountability and liability. At the Johannesburg Earth Summit in 2002, governments acknowledged the need for global rules for global corporations. At Rio+20, they should agree the development of a global instrument that ensures full liability for any social or environmental damage global corporations cause.

Sustainable development cannot become a reality in a world in which short-term bets by the financial markets are all-powerful. Strong controls of financial markets and new fiscal instruments, such as a Financial Transaction Tax, which can slow harmful speculation and deliver much needed finance for development and environmental protection are therefore integral parts of the sustainable development governance reform. A complete social and environmental review of the global trade system should also be conducted.

There has been talk about strengthening UNEP and sustainable development governance for decades. Rio+20 has made sustainable development governance one of its two key themes. **If Rio+20 once again fails to agree on upgrading UNEP and launching a High Seas Biodiversity Agreement, these will be two of the Summit’s most glaring failures.**

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