



Time for a global environment organisation?

By Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Chairman, UNA-UK, and Bonian Golmohammadi, Secretary-General of the WFUNA.

On 15-16 December, governments, international agencies and NGOs will meet to discuss hundreds of recommendations on sustainable development ahead of a major UN conference in June 2012. Known as 'Rio+20', the conference marks the 20th anniversary of the landmark 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which led to the creation of [international conventions on biodiversity, desertification and climate change](#).

Despite these successes, it has been widely acknowledged that many of the goals adopted in 1992, particularly on the environment, have been missed by a wide margin. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has [acknowledged](#) that "most [environmental] indicators have not demonstrated appreciable convergence with those of economic and social progress; indeed, the overall picture is one of increased divergence".

Two decades on, the situation is far more serious. According to the UN, global carbon emissions have risen by over 40% during this period and scientists now believe that they must begin to fall within a decade if we are to avoid a temperature rise of over 2°C. Some 150-200 plant and animal species are thought to become extinct every day, and each year, forests equivalent in size to Greece are cut down.

Climate change and environmental degradation are already affecting the lives of millions, with the poor, as so often, suffering disproportionately. This alone should be enough to spur action. But in these challenging financial times, the economic dimension of sustainable development may well become the catalyst.

In 2006, Sir Nicholas Stern published a [report](#) projecting that unchecked climate change will lead to a loss of at least 5% of global GDP per year. More recently, the UN's Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity [Report](#) estimated that lost benefits from forest ecosystem services alone amount to over \$4trn annually. Developing a green economy will therefore be one of Rio+20's two priorities. The other is assessing the institutional framework needed to address these issues.

At present, international environmental governance is weak and fragmented. A range of UN organisations – from the World Bank to the UN Development Programme – have substantial environmental portfolios. Over 20 UN bodies are engaged at some level in water issues alone. Add to that the new mechanisms created at UN climate talks, such as the Green Climate Fund, and independent bodies like the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), and the need for coordination grows ever-more apparent.

This piecemeal approach has also been applied to multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). Although over 500 have been created since 1992, they have dealt with symptoms rather than joined-up solutions. Take one of the most successful MEAs: the Montreal Protocol, which regulates the use of CFCs. Thanks to the Protocol, the hole in the ozone layer has nearly closed. But it has also prompted a switch to unregulated chemicals, many of which have now significantly compounded global warming.

Institutional change is not popular. It usually requires lengthy (and painful) negotiations and does little to inspire public support, especially when campaigners are calling for urgent action. Last week's climate talks in Durban – where agreement was reached on reaching an agreement by 2015 – exemplified this.

But if we are serious about sustainable development, we need an overarching legal framework with a strong and well-resourced institution at its core to lead our efforts, not least in hammering out what Durban's "agreed outcome with legal force" will mean in practice.

Such an institution could provide strategic direction to UN bodies, increasing coordination and the pooling – and better targeting – of resources. It could centralise oversight of MEAs, which would not only reduce the administrative costs of hundreds of treaty secretariats but also the enormous burden on developing countries that struggle to fulfill their reporting requirements. A new institution could also usefully increase civil society participation. NGOs have long been at the forefront of sustainable development, through their local knowledge, technical capacity and ability to champion the interests of marginalised peoples.

Perhaps most importantly, this particular attempt at institutional reform need not be so painful or protracted. There already exists a UN body that could be 'upgraded' to perform the necessary functions: the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). UNEP has been successful in acting as a voice for environmental issues. It provides authoritative assessments of trends, encourages partnerships and supports MEA secretariats. But it lacks the cash and clout to have a real impact.

UNEP's status within the UN system is relatively low. It is a 'programme' rather than a 'specialized agency' (such as the World Health Organization), even though its normative and technical functions are more suited to the latter category than the former, which comprises operational bodies like the World Food Programme. This means it lacks universal membership and policy and budgetary autonomy – decisions must be referred to the UN General Assembly and are not binding. It is also chronically under-resourced, with an annual, often unmet, budget of just \$220m.

Proposals to upgrade UNEP have been on the table for many years and enjoy the support of a growing number of countries from every geographic region, including the European Union, African Union and small Island developing states.

Achim Steiner, UNEP's head, has warned that the "status quo is no longer an option". We must act now to develop an effective institutional framework that will help us to build a sustainable future for everyone.

Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Chairman of the United Nations Association of the UK and former British Ambassador to the UN

Boniam Golmohammadi, Secretary-General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations, a global nonprofit organisation representing over 100 national associations and their thousands of constituents