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# UNEP in Global Environmental Governance: Design, Leadership, Location

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Maria Ivanova<sup>1</sup>

Well-functioning international institutions become indispensable when individual states, regardless of their economic or military might, confront trans-boundary problems that they cannot solve alone. Few issues are as intrinsically global and as critical to the survival of society as the state of the environment. Yet existing international environmental institutions have proved incapable of solving global environmental problems. Governments as dissimilar as the United States and Iran have expressed concern over the continuing degradation of the global environment and have agreed that international environmental institutions require improvement.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have pointed out that the current environmental governance system lacks coherence and suffers from jurisdictional overlaps and gaps, crippling its ability to respond to overarching environmental problems.<sup>3</sup> Many have also recommended reform of multilateral environmental agreements, the world trade system, the international financial institutions, and, in particular, the anchor organization for the global environment, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).<sup>4</sup> For the success of any reform, however, it is necessary to understand where an organization has succeeded, and where and why it has failed.

In this article, I examine UNEP's performance and analyze the key factors that have determined its track record. I argue that the original vision for UNEP

1. I would like to thank all interviewees who contributed to this analysis as well as the team of students and professionals at the Global Environmental Governance Project ([www.environmentalgovernance.org](http://www.environmentalgovernance.org)). I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their comments. The arguments presented in this article are discussed at greater length in my forthcoming book on UNEP.

2. Iran 2007; and United States 2006. See also Berruga and Maurer 2007.

3. Speth 2004; Speth and Haas 2006; and Carlane 2008.

4. Ivanova 2005, 2009; Speth 2004; Downie and Levy 2000; and Najam, Papa, and Taiyab 2006. For academic proposals for a World Environmental Organization (WEO), see Biermann 2000, 2001, 2002; Biermann and Bauer 2005; and Charnovitz 2002. For a Global Environment Organization (GEO) see Esty 2000; Runge 2001; and Ruggiero 1998. For a Global Environmental Mechanism (GEM) see Esty and Ivanova 2002.

was far-reaching yet pragmatic, and that the organization's mixed performance over the years can be explained by the combined effects of three factors: institutional design, executive leadership and geographical location. Thus, I seek to accomplish two related goals: clarifying the record on UNEP's original design and intent, and laying a foundation for more systematic research of the performance of UNEP and of international organizations in general. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, I explain UNEP's creation, paying particular attention to its institutional form, functions, financing and location. Second, I offer an overview of where UNEP has succeeded and failed in order to target areas for future reform. This entails an assessment of UNEP's performance against the goals and guidelines laid out in its mandate. Finally, I offer explanations for UNEP's mixed performance, and conclude by discussing the task that awaits reformers of the global environmental governance system.

## UNEP's Creation

While UNEP had no predecessor with an explicit and exclusively environmental mandate, the institutional landscape was not vacant before the organization's creation at the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. Many of the UN's specialized agencies had "constitutional responsibilities in large areas of the human environment"<sup>5</sup> and were already engaged in a wide range of activities. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO), for example, was concerned with many aspects of air pollution and climatic change and operated a large number of monitoring stations and research programs. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was involved in a range of environmental concerns relating to land, water, forest resources, and fisheries. The World Health Organization (WHO), in its campaign to monitor and counter the effects of environmental pollution on human health, brought attention to air pollution and widespread contamination of fresh water supplies.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the still-limited scientific understanding of environmental problems in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of governments banded together in an attempt to create a lean, flexible and agile entity that could effectively marshal the environmental expertise already present in the UN system. The result of their efforts was UNEP, formally created and mandated in 1972.

It was not obvious to everyone that a new organization was necessary, however. Existing UN bodies, reluctant to cede authority and compete for financing with another agency, lobbied governments to ensure their continued operation in these areas. In fact, the predominant opinion at that time among governments was that no new agencies were necessary in the UN system.<sup>6</sup>

5. UN General Assembly 1972a.

6. McDonald 2008, 108–109.

*Form Follows Function*

Fairly early on in the process of institutional creation, the principle that form should follow function was adopted. UNEP's institutional status was expected to match its functions and much thought went into devising the proper institutional response. The United States and Sweden were the chief proponents of a new international entity for the environment. The United Kingdom and France were reluctant as they feared international regulation of the contested Concorde project plans.<sup>7</sup> Joined by Germany, Italy and Belgium, they formed the so-called Brussels group to limit the results of the Stockholm Conference. Two additional members of the group, the Netherlands and the United States, "apparently played dual roles"<sup>8</sup> as they were active supporters of the Stockholm Conference but also appeared on the membership list of the Brussels group.

Within the US government, John W. McDonald, Director of Economic and Social Affairs at the State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs, had, by 1970, discussed the possibility of a new UN agency for the environment and started to gather support for it within the Nixon Administration. Instrumental in the creation of several UN offices previously—including the UN Fund for Population Activities, the UN Volunteers, and the post of UN Disaster Relief Coordinator—McDonald recognized the need for a central structure for all environmental efforts.<sup>9</sup> The report of the Committee on International Environmental Programs of the National Academy of Sciences, commissioned by the State Department in preparation for the Stockholm Conference, arrived at the same conclusion: "We recommend the establishment of a unit in the United Nations system to provide central leadership, to assure a comprehensive and integrated overview of environmental problems, and to develop stronger linkages among environmental institutions and the constituencies they serve."<sup>10</sup> This vision of ensuring coherent collective environmental efforts became UNEP's core mission.

While the creation of a specialized UN agency was an early suggestion for a possible institutional form, this option was dismissed by UNEP's creators. They understood the environment as an integrative issue, one that could not and should not be relegated to one agency responsible for one sector, as the existing specialized agency model demanded. Maurice Strong, who served as Secretary General of the Stockholm Conference and later as first Executive Director of UNEP, observed that the new organization's core functions could "only be performed at the international level by a body which is not tied to any individual sectoral or operational responsibilities and is able to take an objective overall view of the technical and policy implications arising from a variety of multi-

7. Engfeldt 2009, 77–79.

8. Engfeldt 2009, 79.

9. McDonald 2008, 91–120; and author's interview with John McDonald, Washington, April 2009.

10. Environmental Studies Board 1972, 31.

disciplinary factors.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, the US National Academy of Sciences voiced concern in their report on future institutional arrangements that a new specialized agency might compete with the organizations it was supposed to influence and, as “one among many,” it would not be “well-placed to exercise a leadership or coordinating function” among the older, better-established agencies.<sup>12</sup>

Recognizing that the institutional landscape was already crowded, the US Advisory Council submitted that “even if all organizations in this bewildering array were effective and well managed, they would provide far too fragmented a structure for the conduct of international environmental affairs,”<sup>13</sup> since an environmental organization must work across numerous traditional policy areas, including agriculture, health, labor, transportation, and industrial development. Moreover, as Maurice Strong noted, concerns about the environment were in fact “a cumulative result of a series of unco-ordinated interventions in the environment and cannot be resolved by a series of *ad hoc* uncoordinated responses.”<sup>14</sup> This vision for what Maurice Strong liked to call “a brain, not a bureaucracy” had a decisive role in shaping UNEP’s form and functions.

The authors of UNEP’s mission understood the future agency’s role as normative and catalytic. They also designed it to be flexible and evolutionary, so that it might grow in reach and prestige as new issues emerged and as it proved capable of resolving them.<sup>15</sup> General Assembly Resolution 2997 (XXII) instituted UNEP in December 1972 as the United Nations’ new body for the global environment.<sup>16</sup>

### *Financing Follows Function*

UNEP’s creators believed that the organization’s position as a leader and coordinator in the UN system would be best established by securing for it as large a budget as possible.<sup>17</sup> With strong support from the administration in the United States, a new Environment Fund of US\$ 100 million was established upon UNEP’s creation.<sup>18</sup> UNEP’s architects reckoned that the fund would cover basic needs; Maurice Strong had initially placed the annual minimum budget at US\$ 25 million, and later revised that figure to US\$ 30–40 million.<sup>19</sup> But they also anticipated that the fund would increase with the growth of the environmental agenda. Initially, the Environment Fund proposal—as elaborated by the US Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on the Stockholm Conference—

11. Strong 1971.

12. Environmental Studies Board 1972, 25.

13. Environmental Studies Board 1972, 23.

14. United Nations Press Release 1971.

15. Gardner 1972; author’s interview with Richard Gardner, New York, October 2007; and author’s interview with Maurice Strong, Beijing, China, June 2008.

16. UN General Assembly, 1972b.

17. Engfeldt 2009, 68.

18. Author’s interview with John McDonald, Washington, April 2009.

19. Engfeldt 2009, 68.

called for the largest consumers of energy, and thus the largest polluters, to contribute on an escalating curve. "A formula derived from each nation's consumption of energy," the Committee suggested, "could provide the basis for the suggested participation in the United Nations Voluntary Fund for the Environment. Or, it might provide the basis for a long-range system of funding, which could be a matter of assessment rather than voluntary participation."<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, however, the Environment Fund was established with voluntary contributions, mostly in order to take advantage of the Nixon administration's enthusiasm for the project. The United States, at this point behind in its payments to the United Nations, had committed to capping its contributions to the specialized agencies at 25 percent of a given agency's budget.<sup>21</sup> The US president, however, had control over voluntary disbursements to the UN, leading the American representatives in Stockholm to expect that the voluntary payment scheme would in the end yield UNEP more money. The voluntary character of the Environment Fund in fact allowed for the United States to contribute 40 percent of the initial US\$ 100 million. From 1972 to 1996, the United States contributed on average 29 percent of UNEP's budget—again, solely through voluntary contributions. Since 1996 though, US contributions have fallen to an average of 15 percent.<sup>22</sup> By way of comparison, the United States would be expected to pay 22 percent of UNEP's budget (the percentage it pays to the specialized agencies, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), FAO, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the WHO) if contributions were assessed rather than voluntary.

### *Location Follows Function*

Time constraints prevented the representatives at Stockholm from formalizing the new organization's physical location. Ten candidate cities had emerged: Cairo, Geneva, London, Malta, Mexico City, Monaco, Nairobi, New Delhi, New York, and Vienna. But UNEP's creators assumed that, in determining the organization's headquarters, matters of form would once again follow function, as they had when UNEP's administrative status and financial structure were decided. The office's placement, according to Strong, would provide it with the ability to link and coordinate the environmental activities of the UN agencies—as well as endowing it with prestige and freedom of movement.<sup>23</sup> Strong had used the same rationale in establishing the Secretariat for the Stockholm Conference in Geneva. Not surprisingly, it was widely believed that, thanks to the many institutions already headquartered there, its communications infrastructure, the high standard of living, and the low set-up and operational costs,

20. United States 1972, 132.

21. *New York Times*, 11 June 1972.

22. Calculations based on UNEP financial data from 1972 to 2004 on file with author.

23. United States 1972.

Geneva would be selected as host for the new environmental body. However, as one contemporary wrote, "a vast surprise was in store for everybody."<sup>24</sup>

Developing countries, eager to see a UN agency headquartered in the South, did not regard the placement of UNEP as a formality. Having been in the running as the future home for the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in 1966, the Kenyan delegation to the General Assembly had learned how to campaign for placement of a UN body. By the time the question of UNEP's location arose in the UN General Assembly in November 1972, Kenya had convinced the other developing countries to withdraw from consideration. As John W. McDonald recalls, India was the strongest candidate among the countries competing for the placement of the new UN body, and the Kenyan government eliminated the competition by insisting that New Delhi drop its candidacy; Kenya would otherwise expel its Indian population. Since the Ugandan leader Idi Amin had set a precedent by expelling Indians from his country several months earlier, and many of the Indians in Uganda had furthermore fled to Kenya, the threat carried unusual weight and India consequently withdrew its candidacy.<sup>25</sup>

The Kenyan delegation then introduced a draft resolution calling for a more equitable geographical distribution of UN bodies and the placement of the new environmental body in Nairobi.<sup>26</sup> Several European countries countered with a proposal to evaluate each candidate city systematically, but they failed to submit their resolution in time. Kenya also succeeded in changing the voting procedure for the resolution from the usual secret ballot to an open ballot. Nairobi had lost the location of UNIDO to Vienna in 1966 in a secret ballot vote in which the balance tipped in Austria's favor, the Kenyans believed, thanks to horse-trading between developing and developed countries. This time Kenya convinced developing countries to hold the phalanx together.<sup>27</sup> UNEP's location was therefore determined more by the politics of the General Assembly than by considerations of effectiveness and efficiency. The Kenyan delegation was aware of the consequences and defended them, claiming that "a political approach was valid because it could serve to eliminate certain technical considerations and practical difficulties which made a decision impossible. The Second Committee was a political body and its decision had to be political."<sup>28</sup>

The draft resolution created a conflict between equitable geographic distribution of UN bodies and the effectiveness of the new environmental organ. At the time, a number of representatives from developing countries acknowledged the problem, and admitted that either Geneva or New York would be the most advantageous location. As the Colombian delegation pointed out, it was in the

24. Stone 1973, 140.

25. For a detailed account of the events, see McDonald 2008, 112–113. See also Downie and Levy 2000, 374, note 28.

26. UN General Assembly 1972c.

27. Kaniaru 2004; and Author's interview with Donald Kaniaru, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2004.

28. UN General Assembly 1972d, 266.

interest of developing countries to locate UNEP “in a country where United Nations organizations had already been established and where as many developing countries as possible already had accredited representations.”<sup>29</sup> Close relationships with organizations such as UNCTAD were necessary for ensuring that the development interests of developing countries were taken into full account in environmental activities. However, “if good sense was outweighed by political considerations,”<sup>30</sup> as one developing country also pointed out, it would vote in solidarity with the Group of 77. Thus, even though rational consensus did not favor placing UNEP in the developing world, political considerations led to a decisive vote for Nairobi. Ninety-three countries voted in favor of the draft resolution; thirty abstained and one voted against. All developed countries and Eastern European countries abstained, and the one opposing vote came from the United States.<sup>31</sup> Several months later, Christian A. Herter, Jr., Director of the Office of Environmental Affairs in the US State Department, testified before the US Congress in support of H.R. 5696, which would authorize the appropriation of US\$ 40 million for the Environment Fund. During his testimony, Herter commented on UNEP’s location in Nairobi:

Well, sir, let’s be very frank. When this was first suggested as the location, we very much opposed it and we opposed it right down to the wire when, frankly, the United States and other countries were greatly outvoted. The issue having been decided, however, Mr. Chairman, the United States in the General Assembly said, in essence: “All right, the matter is decided. We will now do our darndest to make it work.”<sup>32</sup>

Herter’s optimism cannot conceal a sense that UNEP’s placement in Kenya represented a departure from the founding vision for the organization.

## UNEP’s Performance

Almost forty years after its creation, there is still no consensus on UNEP’s performance. Some observers have praised the organization for achieving much with few resources, while others lament its failure to muster more attention and activity. UNEP is considered by some to be “one of the most impressive UN organizations in terms of its actual achievements,”<sup>33</sup> and “given its mandate, its resources, and its authority . . . a remarkable success.”<sup>34</sup> However, it has also been characterized as “weak, underfunded and ineffective in its core functions,”<sup>35</sup>

29. UN General Assembly 1972e, 190.

30. UN General Assembly 1972f, 256.

31. UN General Assembly 1972g.

32. US Congress 1973, 8.

33. Najam 2003.

34. von Moltke 1996.

35. El-Ashry 2007.



"relatively obsolete, eclipsed in resources and prestige . . . under-funded, overloaded and remote,"<sup>36</sup> and a "peanut-sized,"<sup>37</sup> "weak agency."<sup>38</sup>

To date, most of the scholarly literature has assessed the performance of international environmental institutions rather than of particular international organizations.<sup>39</sup> In institutional performance analysis, the main problem is determining the degree to which an institution—that is, a set of principles, rules, norms and procedures—has contributed towards a specific environmental goal. In organizational performance analysis, however, research focuses on the degree to which a given organization has achieved its goals, explicit or implicit. For example, one might conduct an institutional performance analysis on the effectiveness of fishery management, sea-dumping restrictions, or satellite telecommunication.<sup>40</sup> Organizational performance studies, on the other hand, would assess the effectiveness of the WHO, the World Bank, or the Secretariat of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, as each entity went about fulfilling its mission.

In this article I present the first step in the process of a full organizational performance analysis of UNEP. I define performance here as the extent to which particular goals are achieved, using the goals outlined in UNEP's mandate as a benchmark. This analysis applies Ron Mitchell's institutional performance assessment model, which relies on the concepts of goal attainment (progress toward goals), problem solving (progress toward resolving problems), and collective optima (progress toward the ideal solution).<sup>41</sup> In this initial overview, I use the goal attainment yardstick to assess the extent to which UNEP has performed the *functions* (i.e. goals) assigned by its founders. Subsequent work could examine the extent to which UNEP has solved particular environmental problems within its purview, or decreased the distance from a collective environmental optimum.

In 1972 UNEP's founders considered a progression of functions necessary to tackle global environmental problems. First, the problem must be defined using scientific data. Second, a policy goal and methodology should be identified. Third, action must be catalyzed among disparate actors. Fourth, the efforts of the multiple actors must be coordinated into a coherent response. Fifth, capacity for implementation must be created at the level of individual nations. Finally, sound enforcement and dispute resolution procedures must be elaborated.

36. Haas 1994.

37. Speth 2002.

38. von Moltke 1996.

39. Young, King, and Schroeder give the following definition for institutions and organizations: an institution is a "cluster of rights, rules, and decision-making procedures that gives rise to a social practice, assigns roles to participants in the practice, and guides interactions among occupants of these roles." An organization is a "group of people joined together to achieve a specific purpose. Typically an organization has personnel, offices, equipment, a budget, and often legal personality." See Young, King and Schroeder 2008, xxii.

40. Miles et al. 2002.

41. Mitchell 2008, 88–89.

Governments at Stockholm in 1972 approved all but the last function; these formed the core of UNEP's mandate. Though regarded by some as too broad and by others as too narrow,<sup>42</sup> UNEP's mandate has remained clearly defined along five core areas: 1) monitoring, assessment, and early warning; 2) developing international norms, standards, and policies; 3) catalyzing environmental action; 4) coordinating the environmental activities of the UN system; and 5) building national institutional capacity. As Table 1 illustrates, every new policy document has reaffirmed rather than altered UNEP's original mandate. Below I highlight a few of UNEP's achievements and challenges along the following dimensions: information and analysis; policy development; and capacity development.

*Information and Analytical Function: Monitoring, Assessment, and Early Warning*

Information distribution and analysis was at the core of UNEP's mission from its inception, and the organization's ability to scientifically assess global environmental issues is one of its signal successes.<sup>43</sup> UNEP's environmental monitoring capacity was built up early on through the Global Environment Monitoring System (GEMS) and the International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals. Using innovative computer capabilities, UNEP illustrated the distribution of natural and human resources through the Global Resource Information Database (GRID). INFOTERRA, a worldwide network for global environmental information operated by UNEP, provides access to data from about 6,800 institutions and experts in more than 1,000 priority subject areas. In the 1990s, UNEP launched its flagship environmental assessment publication, the *Global Environmental Outlook* (GEO), which has been widely cited as useful for identifying major emerging environmental issues and for placing national issues in a broader perspective. Pursuant to its mandate, however, the organization does not perform monitoring and surveillance of its own. Rather, it collects, analyzes, and integrates data from UN agencies and other organizations including convention secretariats, universities, science institutes, and nongovernmental organizations, in order to synthesize broad environmental assessments. UNEP is also mandated to contribute policy advice, provide early warning on environmental threats, and facilitate international collaborative action. It is able to accomplish these goals, as well as foster nations' ability to cope with environmental problems, through these publications and services. Several collaborating centers have also reported that participation in the process has improved the quality of products and services offered, increased satisfaction among center stakeholders, and enhanced their credibility and reputation.<sup>44</sup>

42. For example, von Moltke 2001 characterizes UNEP's mandate as too big and impossible, 62–63, Iwama 2004 as the “narrow mandate of a ‘catalyst,’” 20, and Biermann and Bauer 2005 as “insufficient,” 4.

43. Haas 2004; and Downie and Levy 2000. For discussion of UNEP's earlier performance on this dimension, see Downie and Levy 2000.

44. UNEP 2004a.

**Table 1**  
UNEP's Mandate

| <i>UNEP's Role and Functions</i>                        | <i>1972 UN General Assembly Resolution 2997 S/19-2</i>   | <i>1997 Nairobi Declaration and GA Resolution S/19-2</i>   | <i>1999 General Assembly Resolution 53/242</i>  |
|---|--|--|---|
| UNEP's role   | "To serve as a focal point for environmental action and co-ordination within the United Nations system in such a way as to ensure a high degree of effective management" (II1)   | "To be the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, that promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and that serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment" (2) |   |
| Monitoring, assessment, and early warning               | "Keep under review the world environmental situation (I2d); Keep under review the implementation of and assess the effectiveness of environmental programmes within the UN system" (II2b)                                      | "Analyse the state of the global environment, assess environmental trends, and provide early warning information on environmental threats" (3a); "Monitor and foster compliance with environmental principles and international agreements" (3c)   | "Information, monitoring and assessment of environmental trends and early warning information on environmental threats" (9) |
| Developing international norms, standards, and policies | "Provide policy guidance for the direction and co-ordination of environmental programmes within the UN system" (I2b); "Submit proposals embodying medium-range and long-range planning for UN environmental programmes" (II2f) | "Provide policy advice" (3a); "Further development of international environmental law aiming at sustainable development" (3b)  |   |

**Table 1**  
(Continued)

| UNEP's Role and Functions | 1972 UN General Assembly Resolution 2997   | 1997 Nairobi Declaration and GA Resolution S/19-2  | 1999 General Assembly Resolution 53/242   |
|---------------------------|--|--|---|
| Catalyzing action         | <p>"Promote contribution to the acquisition, assessment and exchange of environmental knowledge and information" (12e);</p> <p>"Advise intergovernmental bodies of the UN system on the formulation and implementation of environmental programmes" (112c); "Secure effective cooperation of, and contribution from, relevant scientific and other professional communities in all parts of the world" (112d); "Provide advisory services for the promotion of inter national co-operation" (112e)</p> | <p>"Catalyse and promote international cooperation and action" (3a); "Advance implementation of agreed international norms and policies and stimulate cooperative action to respond to emerging environmental challenges" (3c); "Promote greater awareness and facilitate effective cooperation among all sectors of society and actors involved in the implementation of the international environmental agenda and serve as an effective link between the scientific community and policy makers" (3e)</p> | <p>"Increase cooperation in UNEP activities" (4); "Catalyse and promote international co-operation and action" (9)</p>  |
|                           | <p>"Promote international co-operation and recommend policies to this end" (12a);</p> <p>"Co-ordinate environmental programmes within the UN system" (112b)</p>  | <p>"Develop coherent linkages among existing international environmental conventions (3b); Strengthen role in coordination of environmental activities in the UN system" (3d)</p>  | <p>"Strengthen coordination of UNEP activities" (4); "Enhance linkages and coordination within and among environmental and environment-related conventions" (6)</p> |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| Building national institutional capacity | <p>“Review the impact of policies and measures on developing countries, as well as the problem of additional costs, and ensure that programmes and projects are compatible with development plans and priorities of those countries” (12f)</p> | <p>“Provide policy and advisory services in key areas of institution-building to governments and other relevant institutions” (3f);<br/> “strengthen role as an implementing agency of GEF” (3d)</p> | <p>“Capacity-building and technical assistance, in particular with respect to institutional strengthening in developing countries” (11); “enhance role as implementing agency of GEF” (12)</p> |
|--|--|--|--|

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Note: UNEP’s Draft Programme of Work for the 2006–2007 Biennium states that the program’s mandate derives from General Assembly resolution 2997 (XXVII) of December 15, 1972; The Nairobi Declaration and GA resolution S/19-2 of June 28, 1997; and General Assembly resolution 53/242 of July 28, 1999.

There are serious failures, however, in UNEP's record of supplying comparative national data. UNEP's publications provide information by issue and geographic area, but none tracks the comparative performance of countries in addressing environmental challenges. The data, therefore, are not used to their full capacity for informing policy decisions. Thus, while UNEP has a relatively strong scientific track record and is the natural forum for creating a coherent international system for environmental information and assessment, its work has actually not become the standard for quality, relevance, timeliness, and accessibility. Multiple environmental organizations have stepped into the gap and provided information on the state of the global environment, often eroding UNEP's status as the world's preeminent environmental authority. Examples of rival databases include the following:

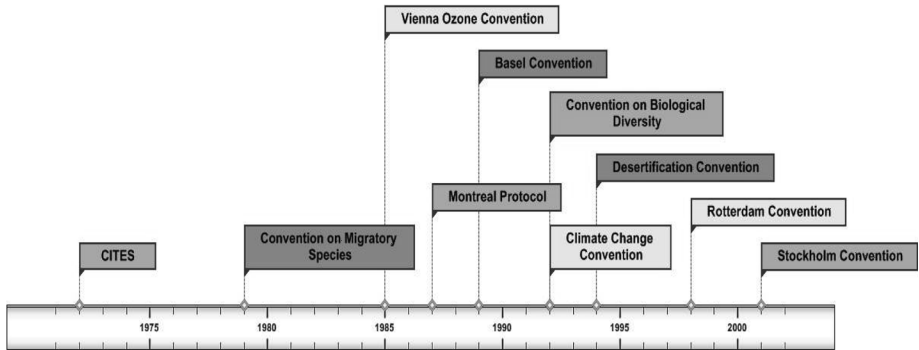
- The World Resources Institute's "Earth Trends," a comprehensive online database outlining global environmental, social, and economic trends and their interrelationships.
- The Worldwatch Institute's annual *State of the World Report*, which measures worldwide progress in achieving sustainable resource use.
- Yale and Columbia Universities' "Environmental Performance Index," which quantifies and numerically benchmarks countries' environmental performance.

Governments have also created a parallel information system, the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS). GEOSS was created in 2005 as a partnership among governments and intergovernmental organizations to provide "comprehensive, coordinated and sustained observations of the Earth system," and "timely, quality long-term global information as a basis for sound decision making"<sup>45</sup>—one of UNEP's core goals. Located in Geneva, GEOSS provides a platform for coordinating monitoring, assessment, and early warning information, and seeks to provide timely, accurate, long-term scientific information as the basis for policymaking. The creation of GEOSS in the wake of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development points to an erosion of confidence in UNEP's ability to adequately fulfill the information and analysis function, which has been a cornerstone of its mandate since 1972.

*Policy Function: Norm and Law Development, Catalytic Role, and Coordination*

UNEP was designed as an international advocacy organization. It was expected to be proactive, setting the global environmental agenda and prodding governments, international organizations, NGOs, and business into action. UNEP's efforts led to the creation of a number of international environmental agreements, including those on ozone, biodiversity, desertification, and persistent organic pollutants (Figure 1). In some cases, such as the protection of the ozone

45. GEOSS 2005, 1.



**Figure 1**

Timeline of Major Multilateral Environmental Agreements Catalyzed by UNEP

Source: Ivanova 2005.

Note: The legal names of the conventions and protocols are: Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora; Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals; Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer; Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer; Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal; Convention on Biological Diversity; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification; Rotterdam Convention; Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

layer, UNEP initiated agreements that led to concrete and highly effective standards, policies, and guidelines. UNEP has played the role of scientific authority, expert leader, procedural foundation, facilitator, and political broker of successful international regimes.<sup>46</sup> But UNEP leadership has been mostly or entirely absent from debates on several critical issues, most notably climate change. As a consequence, UNEP has not succeeded in becoming the central forum for debate and deliberation in the environmental field, analogous to the World Trade Organization (WTO) for global trade or the WHO for health. Moreover, in contrast to other international organizations, including the International Maritime Organization, the International Labor Organization, and the UN Economic Commission for Europe, UNEP has not been able to provide an organizational home for the conventions that have emerged under its aegis.<sup>47</sup> Once launched, most of the environmental conventions have become autonomous entities, each with its own Conference of the Parties, Secretariat, and associated subsidiary bodies, and with influence that often exceeds that of UNEP. Thus, while UNEP has been effective in catalyzing environmental action and creating international environmental agreements across a wide range of issues, it has faced considerable challenges in coordinating international environmental action.

Created as the center of gravity in a complex system of international environmental governance, UNEP was expected to “provide general policy guidance for the direction and co-ordination of environmental programmes within the

46. Downie and Levy, 2000.

47. Biermann 2007.

United Nations system."<sup>48</sup> UNEP therefore has a dual coordination mandate: coordination of the multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) it has sponsored and coordination of the environmental activities of UN agencies. Success in promoting greater coherence and coordination of the numerous MEAs has been limited.<sup>49</sup> For example, UNEP initiated a process of harmonization of reporting requirements for the five biodiversity related conventions (Convention on Biological Diversity, CITES, Convention on Migratory Species, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and the World Heritage Convention) and the two regional seas conventions with biodiversity-related protocols (Barcelona Convention and the Cartagena Protocol). While a common website and a biodiversity clearinghouse mechanism have been established, there has been little substantive progress toward the practical implementation of a common reporting framework. The work on the conventions concerned with hazardous substances has been somewhat more effective, however, as secretariats have been jointly located and common frameworks have been designed.

Coordination of the environmental activities of UN agencies has proven to be an even greater challenge for UNEP. Numerous coordination mechanisms have been created, abolished, and recreated to assist UNEP in this role. In 1972, along with UNEP's Secretariat, Governing Council and Environment Fund, General Assembly Resolution 2997 established the Environment Coordination Board (ECB) under the auspices of the UN Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). Chaired by UNEP's Executive Director, the ECB comprised the Executive Heads of the UN agencies. Its principal mandate was to ensure cooperation and coordination in the UN system on environmental programs and to report annually to UNEP's Governing Council. In 1978, the ACC fully assumed the functions of the ECB and each agency appointed a Designated Official on Environmental Matters (DOEM) to coordinate with UNEP's Executive Director. Held under the continued chairmanship of UNEP's Executive Director, the DOEM oversaw the System-Wide Medium-Term Environment Program.

Following the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the ACC established the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD), which reported to the Commission on Sustainable Development. With the focus having moved away from the environment and UNEP having lost its leadership position, the DOEM too lost influence and in 1995 was replaced by the Inter-Agency Environment Management Group (IAEG). Shortly thereafter, the UN Secretary-General recommended the replacement of the IAEG with the Environmental Management Group (EMG). In 2001, the ACC was transformed into the UN System Chief Executives Board (CEB) for Coordination and the IACSD ceased to exist. The Environment Management Group (EMG) was established in 2001 to coordinate UN agencies, programs, organs, and secretariats of Multilateral Environmental Agreements.<sup>50</sup> The EMG has not lived up to its full potential as a

48. United Nations 1972b.

49. Andresen 2001; and Ivanova 2005.

50. Ivanova 2009b.



joint coordinating body within the UN system, although its recent leadership initiatives on a carbon-neutral UN and sustainable procurement offer promise.<sup>51</sup> As a result of these difficulties in fulfilling its mandate on high-level coordination, UNEP is perceived as just another actor in the environmental field, vying for limited governmental attention and resources, rather than as the leading, anchor organization.<sup>52</sup>

### *Capacity Development Function*

Though many perceive capacity development as a new function for UNEP, building national institutional capacity was part of UNEP's mandate from 1972. Resolution 2997 specified this function, as did the 1997 Nairobi declaration and subsequent UN documents relevant to UNEP's mandate (Table 1). There are reasons for excluding this function from an organizational analysis of UNEP, especially one intended to streamline UNEP's operations. UNEP's creators understood the organization primarily as a nexus for information and coordination, not implementation, and it should be evaluated along the same lines. With a small staff and minimal resources, UNEP has always lacked the capacities of full-fledged operational agencies like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or the World Bank. However, a purely normative role is also insufficient as the need to implement environmental agreements has raised the demand for assistance with capacity development and financing. Moreover, donors place a premium on the delivery of concrete services when determining budget allocations among international organizations, which has increased the pressure on UNEP to come up with projects on the ground. In this context, UNEP is seeking a balance between the normative and the operational.

The 2004 Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building<sup>53</sup> represented an attempt to strike this balance by focusing on coordination, cooperation and partnerships. The Bali Plan underlines UNEP's need to improve interagency coordination and cooperation. It does not, however, clarify the respective roles for UNEP, UNDP and the World Bank, which now more resemble competitors than partners. Despite the need for more concrete achievements on the ground, there is a danger that shifting from a normative and catalytic function to an implementation and operational one might further obscure the line separating UNEP from operational agencies. The focus on implementation places emphasis on reacting to specific country needs and circumstances, a task which UNEP was never intended to fulfill. Governments request many capacity-building projects, compelling UNEP to engage in work for which it lacks the human and financial capacity. The need for assistance with environmental activities at the national level, however, remains unfulfilled. Neither UNDP, nor

51. United Nations Environment Management Group 2007.

52. Inomata 2008; and author's interviews with Tadanori Inomata and Stephan Contius, Nairobi, Kenya, February 2009.

53. UNEP 2004b.

the World Bank, nor UNEP have the ability or the mandate to systematically conceptualize, launch, implement, and scale up environmental programs on a nation-by-nation basis.

In sum, UNEP has had a clear mandate to perform the role of the leading organization in global environmental governance since its inception. Thus far, UNEP has met with only partial success in its mission. It has been relatively effective in two key areas—monitoring and scientific assessment and initiating policy processes for multi-lateral environmental agreements. UNEP was instrumental in the creation of a body of international environmental law and has drawn political attention to a number of issues, ranging from ozone depletion to desertification. It has also often served as the only international partner of frequently marginalized environment ministries and provided a critical forum where they can meet their counterparts. But UNEP has faltered in its role as inter-agency coordinator. It has failed to establish itself as the organizational home for the international environmental conventions and as the lynchpin of environmental activities in the UN. As a result, many other organizations have stepped in to try to fill the vacuum. Without a center of gravity, the system of international environmental governance has grown increasingly complex and fragmented. UNEP has thus failed to become *the* anchor organization for global environmental governance, despite its successes in several capacities and functions. Why is that the case?

## Explaining Performance

International organization (IO) performance is largely explained in the international relations (IR) literature by referring to the interests and influence of the member states that create and finance the organizations. Traditional realist and neoliberal scholarship explains IO performance through distribution of power among states and their rational, self-interested positions. Recent IR studies conceptualize states as ‘principals’ who delegate authority to IOs as their ‘agents’ for the fulfillment of certain tasks on which collective action is required.<sup>54</sup> Principal-agent models assume that IO performance is conditioned by the preferences of the most powerful principals. In the case of UNEP, this reasoning leads to the argument that UNEP has fallen short of the mark because its powerful principals have no interest in a strong environmental advocate. Thus, most of UNEP’s deviations from its mandate as the global leader on the environment would be explained by the lack of support from member states, particularly the United States. Two pieces of evidence have been cited in support of this argument: First, UNEP’s supposedly weak original design, which saddled it with broad functions, sub-par institutional form, and voluntary financing; and second, its diminishing financial support over the years. I will address these points when analyzing UNEP’s design, below.

54. Hawkins et al. 2006.

A more recent perspective in the IR literature on international organizations is sociological institutionalism, which stresses that such organizations are, in essence, bureaucracies with their own “social life,” culture, and politics.<sup>55</sup> This theoretical framework builds on the idea that an organization’s abilities to fulfill its functions is shaped by internal ideologies, norms, and resource struggles. Organizations develop intrinsic characters and interests as well as the capacities to pursue an autonomous line of thought. Further, this perspective gives significant explanatory power to the influence exerted by an individual leader or by staff.<sup>56</sup> Such an approach, therefore, allows for leadership, management, and organizational culture as explanatory variables in UNEP’s performance.<sup>57</sup> Few scholars have accorded serious and systematic attention to these issues, with the notable exception of Downie and Levy’s analysis, which points to UNEP’s reliance on a charismatic leader and to serious management difficulties such as “confusing organizational structures, inadequate attention to performance indicators, [and] inefficient hiring practices”<sup>58</sup> as key obstacles to the organization’s mission.

In this analysis, I build on both the principal-agent and sociological institutionalist approaches, while adding concepts from management theory, to create an analytical framework for explaining the performance of international organizations. I argue that *both* state influence and internal organizational dynamics affect performance,<sup>59</sup> but that even this does not fully resolve the question. States determine the administrative status, function, and financial structure of international organizations—that is, their design. Internal organizational dynamics, in turn, are shaped by organizational leadership. Thus, I use institutional design and leadership as key analytical constructs. But international organizations are also products of their contextual environment, and, in particular, the geographic location within which they operate. IR scholars, focusing on the World Bank and other international organizations located in metropolitan cities in the Northern hemisphere, tend to discount this factor, assuming that member states’ interests and preferences are adequate predictors of performance. Scholarship on international business, on the other hand, has recognized the importance of location in terms of unique factor endowments, geographical proximity of partner organizations, and the positive externalities generated from organizational clustering (i.e. access to a larger and more qualified work force, better training opportunities, and potential partnerships).<sup>60</sup> These insights can be applied productively to the field of international relations. Cities such as New York and Geneva exhibit features that the management literature

55. Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Weaver 2007; and Weaver and Park 2007. The management literature has traditionally analyzed organizations as independent actors where management, culture, leadership, among other factors explain organizational performance. See Collins 2001, 2005.

56. Vetterlein 2007.

57. See Downie and Levy 2000; and Ivanova 2007.

58. Downie and Levy 2000, 362.

59. See Weaver 2007; and Weaver and Park 2007.

60. Nachum 2000.

considers critical to performance, including well-developed transportation and communications infrastructures, a large supply of well-educated employees, relatively efficient regulatory and legal systems, and easy access to constituencies, donors, and technologies.<sup>61</sup> Judged by these standards, UNEP's location in Nairobi is a substantial liability and an important explanatory variable.<sup>62</sup> UNEP's remoteness from the centers of international political activity and inadequate communications have hampered its ability to coordinate effectively the UN's environmental activities, to assert itself as the central actor in global environmental governance, and to attract and retain the most highly qualified policy staff. Thus, location has had a very significant effect on the organization by shaping some of its fundamental capacities, especially its ability to recruit staff, communicate with other organizations, and gain public attention. All three categories of factors—design, leadership, and location—have influenced UNEP's performance. Understanding their influence provides an insight into the organization's evolution and possibility for reform.

### *Design*

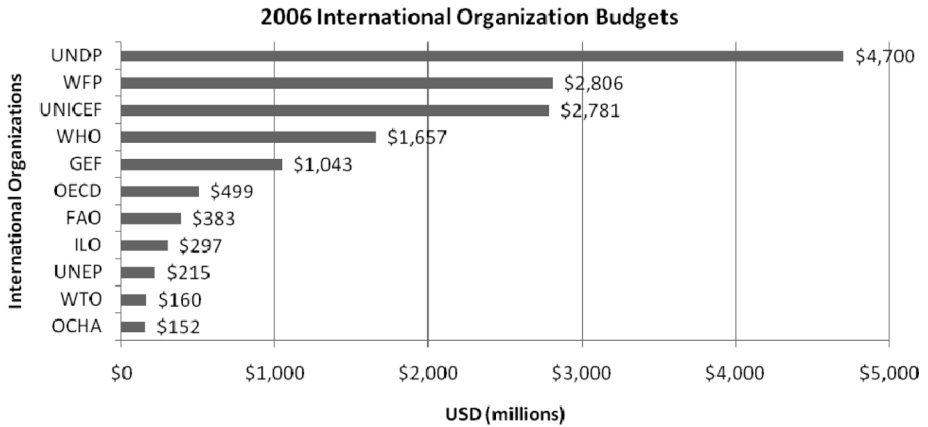
States determined UNEP's design—its functions, form, and financing. UNEP was constituted as a program, rather than a specialized agency, to prevent competition with existing UN bodies, to avoid the encumbering effects of the customary administrative and governing arrangements of specialized agencies, and to resist the bracketing and marginalization of the environment as a distinct sector.<sup>63</sup> UNEP's mandate was expected to make the organization a catalyst and coordinator in an already cluttered institutional landscape. Basing its financing on voluntary contributions was intended to give UNEP the ability to grow as it proved its abilities. The effects of these choices, however, have incapacitated UNEP in some respects.

UNEP's status as a UN programme has impacted the organization in two primary ways. It has rendered UNEP incapable of enforcing its will on larger and more autonomous UN agencies, since it has no formal authority over them, and it has determined the voluntary character of the funding mechanism. In the UN hierarchy, programmes have the least independence and authority because they are subsidiary organs of the General Assembly, and because membership in UN programmes is not universal. Specialized agencies, on the other hand, are autonomous intergovernmental organizations drawing authority from universal membership and governing bodies that are independent of the UN Secretariat and General Assembly. Perceived immediately as a possible competitor by

61. Porter 1998.

62. Downie and Levy 2000, 361; and Mee 2005, 238.

63. Author's interviews with Richard Gardner, New York (via phone), May 2007; William Reilly, Los Angeles (via phone) July 2007; Russell Train, Washington, July 2007; Maurice Strong, Beijing, June 2008; Mostafa Tolba, Cairo, March 2008; Lars-Göran Engfeldt, New York, February 2008; and John McDonald, Washington, April 2009.

**Figure 2**

2006 Budget of Selected International Organizations (US\$ millions)

Source: Ivanova 2009a.

the specialized agencies, UNEP has not been able to gain the authority to guide and direct the rest of the UN system on the environment. It is only fair to note that UNDP, also a programme and a “decentralized complex of relatively autonomous (and creative) people and organizations,” is largely regarded as the UN’s authority on development.<sup>64</sup>

Analysts have pointed to UNEP’s limited, voluntary financial resources as a source of many of its challenges.<sup>65</sup> UNEP’s annual budget of about US\$ 180 to US\$ 215 million (depending on whether trust funds and other earmarked contributions are included) is miniscule in comparison with the ultimate task with which the organization was charged. The budget is also much smaller than those of many other international organizations active in the environmental arena (Figure 2). Voluntary contributions are unpredictable and unstable, and inhibit long-term strategic planning since states can decide whether to contribute or not on a biannual basis. Voluntary contributions, however, also have the potential to increase beyond the levels approved by national legislatures. As Figure 2 illustrates, UNDP’s budget (also voluntary) is by far the largest in the UN family of organizations. It is followed in magnitude by the World Food Programme and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The status of a programme in the UN system, therefore, while a determinant of the voluntary character of funding, does not automatically explain the level of financing.

The larger budgets of UNDP, WFP and UNICEF might be attributable to their operational mandates and, some would argue, to the accessibility and

64. Murphy 2006, 18; and Mee 2005.

65. Najam 2003; von Moltke 1996; and Downie and Levy 2000.

popularity of their specialized issues. Analysts of these organizations also point out, however, that their well-received performance is closely associated with boosted funding.<sup>66</sup> A council of representatives from several donor nations concluded in 2006 that UNDP, WFP, and UNICEF were relatively effective in delivering on their missions and mandates.<sup>67</sup> For example, seen by many as “ahead of the curve,”<sup>68</sup> UNDP has grown from a “modest experiment” in coordination of technical assistance and “blossomed into a substantial and integrated approach in development planning and coordination.”<sup>69</sup> UNDP has become the UN’s center of gravity in the development field. Its budget increased from the initial US\$ 20 million of the Expanded Program of Technical Assistance (EPTA) in the 1950s, to US\$ 152 million in 1965 when EPTA became UNDP, to US\$ 1 billion in 1989, to well over US\$ 4 billion in 2006.<sup>70</sup> Increases in contributions to UNEP have been more modest. UNEP’s income rose from US\$ 22 million in 1974–75 to US\$ 400 million in 2000–2001 to US\$ 440 million in 2006–2007. The contributions of the top 15 donors to UNEP, UNICEF, and UNDP illustrate the stark difference between the levels of contribution of the same countries to these three organizations (Table 2). Canada, for example, contributed US\$ 0.8 million to UNEP in 2006, US\$ 12 million to UNICEF and US\$ 48 million to UNDP. Similar and even larger differences are observed in the contributions of other countries.

Such variance in financial support from the same set of donors demands systematic research. What accounts for the dramatically different levels of financing from the same countries to different organizations? One hypothesis relates to the loss of confidence in UNEP, particularly in the 1990s. Notably, in 1996, Executive Director Elizabeth Dowdeswell (1993–1998) observed that UNEP’s work was “no longer on the leading edge or represent[ing] sufficient added value.”<sup>71</sup> The resulting financial shortfalls led to a downward spiral—with lower confidence in UNEP, states contributed less, and with a lower budget, UNEP achieved less, leading to greater decrease in both confidence and contributions.<sup>72</sup> This dynamic was reversed during the tenure of Dr. Klaus Töpfer as UNEP Executive Director (1998–2006) and UNEP’s budget has continued to increase under Achim Steiner, who assumed UNEP’s leadership in 2006. Indeed, it has been noted that Environment Fund contributions reflect the degree of satisfaction with the leadership of UNEP.<sup>73</sup>

66. Murphy 2006.

67. MOPAN 2006, 2007. The Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) is comprised of Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

68. Murphy 2006, 3.

69. Leonard 2006, 1606.

70. Leonard 2006, 1606.

71. UNEP 1996, cited in Downie and Levy 2000, 360.

72. Downie and Levy 2000; and Heimer 1999.

73. Mee 2005.

**Table 2**

Fifteen Largest Donors to UNEP, UNDP and UNICEF (US\$ millions)

| <i>DONOR</i>   | <i>UNEP<br/>Environment Fund<br/>(regular resources)<br/>2006</i> | <i>UNICEF<br/>regular resources<br/>2006</i> | <i>UNDP<br/>regular resources<br/>2004</i> |
|----------------|---|--|--|
| Australia      | —   | 6  | —  |
| Belgium        | 0.8   | —  | 16   |
| Canada         | 0.8   | 12   | 48   |
| Denmark        | 2.6   | 31   | 60   |
| Finland        | 3.6   | 17   | 17   |
| France         | 4.3   | 17   | 20   |
| Germany        | 7   | —  | 33   |
| Ireland        | 1   | 13   | 16   |
| Italy          | —   | —  | 18   |
| Japan          | 3   | 21   | 87   |
| Netherlands    | 6.3   | 37   | 94   |
| Norway         | 2.2   | 47   | 98   |
| Spain          | 1.8   | 8  | —  |
| Sweden         | 2.8   | 58   | 85   |
| Switzerland    | 2.9   | 14   | 41   |
| United Kingdom | 7.8   | 36   | 72   |
| United States  | 5.7   | 126  | 99   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>53</b>   | <b>441</b>                                   | <b>804</b>                                 |

Sources: UNEP 2006, 82; UNICEF 2006, 37; and Murphy 2006, 214.

Note: Some countries (Australia, Germany, Italy and Spain) are among the fifteen largest donors for some of the organizations but not for others.

*Leadership*

UNEP's status as a programme in the UN system and its remoteness from the rest of the international organizations that it was supposed to coordinate with have created a strong reliance on the Executive Director to promote UNEP as a catalyzing agent, to elevate the organization's profile, and to garner political support. Internally, the Executive Director is largely responsible for providing UNEP with direction and vision. Externally, the Executive Director is critical for securing steady funding and integral to keeping UNEP and environmental concerns in the public eye. UNEP's structure places unusually heavy burdens on its upper management, in effect demanding that its leadership integrate seamlessly the roles of technical expert, manager, politician, and charismatic visionary.

The drafting of the 1989 Montreal Protocol to protect the ozone layer exemplifies UNEP's dependence on strong leadership. The success of the treaty



is to a great extent attributable to the strong leadership exercised in negotiations by UNEP's Executive Director at the time, Dr. Mostafa Tolba. Indeed, the literature on UNEP recognizes that under Tolba's leadership from 1976 to 1992, UNEP became "an effective force behind the formulation of binding international environmental treaties"<sup>74</sup> and as a result developed a strong "personality culture" around its leadership.<sup>75</sup> While providing results for the solution of environmental problems, however, Tolba's "arm twisting" approach to negotiations affected UNEP as an organization. According to some senior UNEP officials, it affected attitudes towards UNEP at high levels in some governments, preventing UNEP from leading the 1992 Earth Summit or serving as the lead agency for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. Furthermore, "while on many occasions Tolba 'won' new responsibilities for UNEP in political turf battles with other UN bodies,"<sup>76</sup> the organization could not handle many of its new operational commitments. Analysts point to a result of "a 'pork-barrel' culture in which many ill-advised or unsuccessful projects have strong constituencies, both among international governments and within UNEP's own administration."<sup>77</sup>

Additionally, UNEP's organizational culture is often affected by communication difficulties between administrative levels, unresponsive management, and internal politicking. As one analyst of UNEP remarks, "the heart of the problem seems to be that internal tensions are not coherently addressed by the executive level [and] at least partially, this can be explained by the notorious traveling schedule of the executive director."<sup>78</sup> UNEP's remote location indeed necessitates excessive travel by the Executive Director. The internal management problems are thus intimately connected to the contextual environment of UNEP.

### *Location*

UNEP is the only UN agency headquartered in the developing world, with the exception of UN Habitat (also located in Nairobi, and until 2000 headed by the Executive Director of UNEP). While politically symbolic, UNEP's location has isolated the organization from UN agencies engaged in relevant activities. UNEP's communicative and coordinating mission has been crippled by the organization's quartering in Nairobi. Kenya's capital is a four- to five-hour flight from the nearest major cities; even travel to other African destinations is burdensome. The state of transportation options severely limits face-to-face interaction with counterparts from other agencies, and even with government or international officials in other African countries. Coupled with the inadequacy of

74. Heimer 1999, 130; and Downie and Levy 2000.

75. Mee 2005, 235.

76. Heimer 1999, 131.

77. Heimer 1999, 131.

78. Bauer 2007, 21.



Nairobi's telecommunications network, UNEP has been unable to deliver on the core part of its mandate—to create, catalyze, and coordinate the environmental program of the United Nations. Without close contact with the core environmental body, and with increasing pressure to integrate environmental considerations into their work, existing agencies simply began developing their own environmental agendas, while entirely new organizations arose in traditional centers of government and communications. The Commission on Sustainable Development was created in New York and the Global Environment Facility in Washington, drawing US political and financial attention away from UNEP. Yet more remarkably, many of the multilateral environmental agreements negotiated by UNEP became independent entities with secretariats in Bonn, Geneva, Montreal, or Rome.

One of the significant effects of UNEP's placement in Nairobi was the expectation in developing countries that UNEP would engage in fieldwork and deliver results on the ground. UNEP has thus far been unable to deliver on these operational expectations since its mandate is explicitly normative. Perhaps the most important and least discussed consequence of UNEP's location, however, has been the challenge it faces in recruiting and retaining high-quality staff with the policy expertise and experience necessary to improve the organization's international standing. The dicey security situation in Kenya, the challenging aspects of daily life in a poor country, and separation from colleagues, friends, and family present a real burden on staff which cannot be dismissed easily. Staff composition determines institutional memory and organizational culture, affects expertise and leadership, and provides the basis on which reputation and authority are built.

## Reforming Global Environmental Governance

Today's debates on reforming global environmental governance stand at a crossroads strikingly reminiscent of the one facing the system's original architects in the lead-up to the 1972 Stockholm Conference. In 1971, governments asked the same questions that loom today: What is the most effective and reliable kind of organizational setup for solving environmental problems? Is there a need for a single environmental agency? How can cooperation between existing agencies be enhanced? How must environmental functions relate to other priority functions, particularly in the field of economic and social development?<sup>79</sup>

The answers to these questions formed the bedrock on which UNEP was founded, and remain as relevant now as they were in the 1970s. It is clear, however, that the organization created in 1972 has not fulfilled some of its core functions effectively, and that a broad consensus has emerged in favor of reforming the framework for global environmental governance.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless,

79. Bush 1971.

80. Group of 77 and China 2007, 1; Najam, Papa, and Tayiab 2006, 4; and Inomata 2008.

there remain serious differences of opinion on how best to move forward. Some scholars argue that our first attempt at global environmental governance has largely failed.<sup>81</sup> Others contend that “the system needs reform not because it has ‘failed’ but because it has outgrown its own original design [m]uch like children who outgrow their clothes as they mature.”<sup>82</sup> The first line of analysis assumes that UNEP’s institutional form has been a hindrance, and calls for far-reaching institutional reforms, including the creation of a World Environment Organization (be it a reformed UNEP or an entirely new agency). The second line of analysis assumes that UNEP’s original mission and mandate are either insufficient or inappropriate, and calls for further clarification of UNEP’s mandate and focusing on its functions of information distribution, management of negotiations, and a limited amount of coordination.<sup>83</sup>

This article has shown that, while UNEP’s original design limited the organization, it was not the root cause of its shortcomings. As originally imagined, UNEP was both a practical and a practicable idea. It was conceived as an agile, swift, adaptable, and effective body that could leverage the strengths of the rest of the UN system to attain better environmental results. In essence, the 1972 vision was for an active agent within the UN system to ensure the mainstreaming of environment into all other aspects of UN work, leading with ideas and by example. UNEP cannot, in this sense, outgrow its mission. Rather, it was never able to fully grow into it.

A number of fundamental problems have affected the organization’s performance since its origin. While traditional IR studies assume that states determine IO performance, this article outlined the importance of internal organizational dynamics and the contextual environment, i.e. leadership and location. Any serious analysis of an organization also needs to consider management, work culture, and organizational vision. This last factor will be particularly important for revitalizing UNEP in the coming years. Under the leadership of its current Executive Director, Achim Steiner, UNEP has begun working on a new strategic vision. The Medium Term Strategy for 2010–2013 identifies crucial lessons from past challenges, stressing the importance of a sound and authoritative scientific base, the need to engage deeper with convention secretariats and other UN entities, the benefits of working with a broad range of groups, and the necessity of improving internal management.<sup>84</sup> UNEP’s location has had a more significant effect on the organization than many scholars and administrators are comfortable admitting. It has brought a substantial burden onto UNEP’s shoulders in the form of unanticipated operational expectations, recruitment difficulties, diminished visibility and connectivity, and, consequently, diminished authority. UNEP still seeks to establish itself as “the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, that promotes the coher-

81. Speth 2004; and Speth and Haas 2006.

82. Najam, Papa, and Tayiab 2006, 3.

83. Downie and Levy 2000, 372.

84. UNEP 2008a.

ent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system, and that serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment."<sup>85</sup> And indeed, UNEP was envisioned as just such an organization. Any reform effort, therefore, must consider carefully UNEP's original design and the factors that have prevented the organization from delivering on its mission before deciding to transform radically its functions or its form.

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85. UNEP 2008b, 1.

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