



A Series of Governance Papers by Stakeholder Forum, Focusing on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Triple Planetary Crisis

Paper 6: UN80 - Is it time for the Re-Emergence of the Global Ministerial Environment Forum?

By Jan-Gustav Strandenaes

“We shall have to do more with less” was the summary message from a meeting in Oslo, Norway, this spring (2025), where the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, Mr. Espen Barth Eide, and Mr. Guy Ryder, Under-Secretary-General for Policy at the UN and Chair of UN80, both spoke about UN80 and the necessity to reform the UNⁱ. The UN80 initiative is, according to Antonio Guterres, SG of the UN, “a system-wide push to streamline operations, sharpen impact, and reaffirm the UN’s relevance for a rapidly changing world”.ⁱⁱ

“We will come out of this process with a stronger, fit-for-purpose UN, ready for the challenges the future will undoubtedly bring us,” Mr. Ryder has said.ⁱⁱⁱ The precarious financial situation of the UN family has, however, led many to say that these nice words are euphemisms for a dramatic UN reform, fearing a necessary downscaling of many of its important activities.

This article builds on previous articles on clustering around the Triple Planetary Crisis of pollution (see [How Clustering Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Bring Multiple Benefits to the Environment](#) by Michael Stanley Jones), climate change (see [UN 80: Clustering the Climate Change Conventions by Stacey Azores](#)), and biodiversity loss (see [Towards Enhancing Synergies among Biodiversity-Related MEAs: Addressing Fragmentation with Strategic Coordination](#). Clustering biodiversity conventions by Hugo-Maria Schally) and most recently, the article on the possibility of clustering the three science bodies (see [Better Use of the World’s Expertise in Navigating the Polycrisis](#) by Peter Bridgewater and Rakhyun Kim).

The UN 80 process enables us to look at some of the history of the UN Environment Programme and how to make it more “agile, integrated, and equipped to respond to today’s complex global challenges”^{iv}. A historic lens is needed, and it would be wise to see if elements of this history can be resurrected and a debate around them can be reenergized to accomplish the goals of the present reform process.

The institutional constraints of UNEP

Where is UNEP in all this? UNEP is a Programme under the UN General Assembly, UNGA, one of the Charter Bodies. As such, any change in UNEP’s structure and status has to be

ⁱ From the author’s own notes, he participated in this meeting

ⁱⁱ From UN80 website: <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

recognised by the UNGA. The UNGA has the power to directly affect UNEP's work, as well as the outcomes of the UN Environment Assembly, UNEA, even though UNEA is also a body with universal membership.

What was the Global Ministerial Environment Forum?

There are no positive and tangible results without continuity. Since its inception, UNEP has been run by the Governing Council (GC), which consists of 58 member states elected for a four-year period. The GC met in Nairobi every two years, effectively diminishing UNEP's role as a consistent guardian of environmental issues, at least at the political level.

As environmental problems increased over the years, there was an increasing need for more continuous political decision-making to meet and solve environmental issues, and the Global Ministerial Environment Forum, the GMEF, was established, among others, in order to answer to this challenge.

Conceived as a Special Session, the 6th since the founding of UNEP, the first GMEF took place in the city of Malmö in Sweden in the year 2000. It was hailed as a success for several reasons.^v One notable aspect was that 73 Ministers of Environment attended and engaged in various debates, including exerting political leadership. Even though 73 member states attended with their environment ministers - the highest ever at the time at an international conference - it is well to remember that the UN then consisted of 189 member states. A significant outcome document was the Malmö Declaration, which outlines in no uncertain terms the environmental challenges, that UNEP was the preeminent global organisation on environmental issues, and that there is an urgent need for UNEP and all stakeholders to engage and work to safeguard the environment^{vi}.

UNEP, with increasing knowledge of the environment, is still lacking in authority

Knowledge and understanding of environmental issues grow constantly and make clear to all its inherent complexity, resulting in new and sometimes divergent environmental themes demanding new political approaches.

On the verge of the 21st Century, and sensing new and dramatically different challenges, the then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, outlined these challenges in his report to the UN GA in 2000, called "We the peoples: The role of the UN in the 21st Century." Here, he called for a Millennium Ecosystem Assessment to be delivered^{vii}. New environmental issues were identified, and the multitude of these issues was another reason for establishing the GMEF in 2000. There was a need to try to develop policy coherence.

The second GMEF was held in Cartagena, Colombia, in February 2002, and nearly 100 Ministers of Environment attended^{viii}. Again, the presence of Ministers proved advantageous to the deliberations and outcome results. This conference also became an important informal preparatory meeting for the upcoming World Summit for Sustainable Development, WSSD, to be held later that year in Johannesburg. The delegates at this GMEF

^v <https://enb.iisd.org/events/6th-special-session-unep-governing-council-and-3rd-global-ministerial-environment-forum-3>

^{vi} UN Digital Library: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/666264?ln=en>

^{vii} <https://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/About.html>

^{viii} https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/11331/K0260448_E_GcassVii-Proceedings.pdf.

Note - in the report, the meeting is referred to as the 7th Special Session, which is formally correct, but it was the second Global Ministerial Environment Forum, GMEF after the first GMEF in Malmö, Sweden in 2000

emphasised the importance of this forum, and the proposal to organise a GMEF in odd years and not in Nairobi was tabled and agreed to. Annual high-level conferences on the environment were agreed as a necessity. Another interesting proposal tabled was that membership in the GMEF should be universal, an idea that took ten years to materialise. It was not until Rio+20 in 2012 that universal membership at a UN body dealing with environmental policies, the UNEA, was agreed to.

The 11th Governing Council and Global Ministerial Environment Forum was held in Nusa Dua, Indonesia, in 2010. A simultaneous extraordinary Conference of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, three Multilateral Environmental Agreements, was held back-to-back with the GC/GMEF.^{ix} The conference had an overarching objective of enhancing cooperation and coordination and improving synergies in multilateral environmental agreements. As one report states, the meeting broke new ground and set an example of resource-saving coherence among MEAs and perhaps even within the UN system.^x

Without a seemingly proper analysis of the benefit of annual meetings, the GC/GMEF processes were discontinued with the adoption of the UN Environment Assembly, the UNEA, which held its first session in 2014, and the process was back to high-level environment meetings every second year. As the UNEAs were to be held every other year, this decision actually lost the continuity that had been established with the GC/GMEF process. With the increasing environmental challenges, not the least their complexity, maybe the time has now come to reinstitute annual UN environmental conferences and use the model which was established by the GC/GMEF process - every other year in Nairobi, and the intermittent year in the capital of a member state.

Strengthening UNEP and UNEA by re-establishing the GMEF

If we re-establish the GMEF and combine it with the UNEAs, we would accomplish a continuity of high-level political and policy-oriented meetings for the environment. The UNEA would, if this were to take place, continue as it is presently organised, but the GMEF would be different. Two UN entities would play centre-stage: The MEAs and the Science-Policy Interfaces.

UNEP has been designated by the governing bodies of eight MEAs to provide secretariat functions to those conventions. This host relationship established with UNEP means that UNEP is providing administrative and financial support for each secretariat to carry out its responsibilities.^{xi}

UNEP has, for a long time, been at the forefront of scientific research on environmental issues. Three Science Policy systems have been established and receive support from UNEP.^{xii}

The oldest is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, established in 1988. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem

^{ix} <https://enb.iisd.org/unepgc/unepps11/>

^x <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n10/426/14/pdf/n1042614.pdf#page=33>

^{xi} <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/why-does-un-environment-matter/secretariats-and-conventions>

^{xii} <https://www.unep.org/topics/environmental-law-and-governance/environmental-policy/science-policy-interface>

Services, the IPBES, is less well-known to the outer world compared to IPCC. It began functioning in 2014 with a secretariat based in Bonn.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution, ISP-CWP, is a new, independent intergovernmental body established to strengthen the global science-policy interface. It began its official existence in June this year (2025).

What could the agenda for the Forum be? It would have to complement and support the upcoming UN Environment Assembly. There would also be other overarching thematic priorities - the Triple Planetary Crisis, the current Medium-Term Strategy, and the Programme of Work.

The GMEF could be a place where the three established clusters of MEAs, focusing on pollution (chemicals and waste), biodiversity, and climate change, could meet to address synergies, gaps, and potential areas for collaboration. The MEAs could identify relevant work of a common nature that exists between the conventions and explore interlinkages between them. All this could be informed by the first day of a GMEF when the three science bodies could have identified and presented crucial environmental issues to be solved.

As the meeting would take place midway between the HLPF, the outcome report could also deal with the environmental elements of the SDGs to be dealt with by the next HLPF.

This proposed agenda involves clustering around themes of the Triple Planetary Crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change, ideas, and implementation across science and environmental governance to influence political priorities.

As the GMEF would begin with presentations by the three science bodies outlining urgent issues relating to the Triple Planetary Crisis^{xiii}, their presentations could inform the discussions throughout the week, but also support any member state in their negotiations at the GMEF, as all stakeholders would discuss common problems. The focus of a systemic nature could be on the inherent inefficiencies in the use of financial resources, the MEAs could look at inconsistencies in the international legal systems, and they all could discuss functional inefficiencies, but most importantly, identify their failures to address interlinkages.

When “forced by a common agenda”, they would all have to focus their priorities on the same themes and thus cluster their input.

An example of an area addressed by the three clusters together could be that of nitrogen, currently under discussion, which exemplifies a cross-cutting theme that could challenge all the UN units mentioned here to explore their approach to addressing it. And if all are assembled in a five-day conference, that could quite possibly happen.

Could such a meeting be financed? The old GMEF was partly financed by the hosting city and country. These cities gave generous grants to the conference, knowing full well that they would earn tenfold in return as a consequence of participation from 193 member states delegations coming to their city.

The best outcome for UNEP in UN80

UNEP and UNEA lack proper funding, but perhaps its biggest weakness, which hampers its many efforts to be the preeminent global environment organisation, is UNEP’s lack of

^{xiii} <https://www.unep.org/resources/global-foresight-report>

authority and political status. This is perhaps the major reason that hampers its efforts to improve its own system.

Substantial improvements in its internal institutional system will always be difficult as long as UNEP is merely a programme under the General Assembly. The GA's own rules of procedure, its standing in the UN system, and its geographical placement in New York, make it the key organisational body of the UN, which, by its own position in the UN hierarchy, also makes it a rigid organisation. Whereas UNEP hosts delegations from ministries of the environment, the UNGA delegations are from ministries of foreign affairs.

These ministries address environmental problems in different ways. Whereas foreign offices are among the most important government entities in a country and have, by and large, a generalist understanding and competence on environmental issues, environmental ministries have environmental expertise but are weak in terms of political clout. During the last two decades, environment ministries have also suffered a serious reduction of political influence in several countries, and a few have even been closed down^{xiv}.

UN80 can start the process of finishing the work of Klaus Toepfer and Achim Steiner, two former Executive Directors at UNEP, on clustering the biodiversity conventions, and if UNFCCC comes under UNEP, it will provide an opportunity for a cluster on climate change. The creation of a more coordinated and effective science platform will help member states to have the right information and address the environmental issues they raise in a coordinated way.

By focusing on conventions under UNEP management, we gain a more coherent approach, albeit one that does not cover all relevant conventions, but one that will have a greater impact on addressing the Triple Planetary Crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. The proof of concept for the chemicals and waste cluster successfully carried out at the 11th GMEF in 2010 should show us the way.

The re-establishment of the Global Environmental Ministers Forum enables member states at a high level to address the interlinkages, gaps, and work programmes of the three established clusters. Wouldn't it be great to have this ready for 2030, when we will address the future approach to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? A stronger UNEP has been the vision for many people for a long time. UN80 enables the chance to make that a reality.

The Author

Jan-Gustav Strandenaes is a Senior Adviser, Stakeholder Forum. In 2018, he was appointed by the German Government to a peer group assessing its national Sustainability Strategy. Chaired by the former prime minister of New Zealand and UNDP Executive Director Helen Clark, the final report was handed to the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

For decades, Jan-Gustav has delivered projects for the United Nations Environment Programme on stakeholder engagement issues and had assignments for UNDESA, one of which had him coordinating civil society input for the entire Rio+20 process, the open working group for the Sustainable Development Goals, and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

^{xiv} <https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/18/devastating-consequences-as-new-swedish-government-scrap-environment-ministry>

ABOUT STAKEHOLDER FORUM

Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future (SF) is a not-for-profit international organisation working to advance sustainable development at all levels. For more than 25 years, SF has been a bridge between stakeholders of all kinds and the international intergovernmental forums where sustainable development, and in particular the environment and issues related to its good governance, are debated, global goals are established, and strategies are mapped out. Our work aims to enhance open, accountable, and participatory decision-making and good governance for sustainable development through the continuous involvement and participation of stakeholders in these forums, and in the action that flows from their work.

To this end, we work with a diversity of stakeholders globally on international policy development and advocacy; stakeholder engagement and consultation; media and communications, and capacity building - all with the ultimate objective of promoting progressive outcomes on sustainable development through an open and participatory approach. In consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1996, SF also works with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under an MOU to expand the engagement and participation of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders in the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and HLPF processes.

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