

World view

At 50, the UN Environment Programme must lead again



By Maria Ivanova

To protect the planet's health, the agency must rediscover its capacity for connecting organizations.

Almost 50 years ago, as the grim extent of human damage to the biosphere became apparent, diplomats created what became the United Nations Environment Programme. UNEP is best known for its leadership in shrinking the ozone hole and for co-founding the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; its influence is the main reason that most countries now have environmental ministries. Other wins include establishing international instruments to control pesticides and herbicides, hazardous wastes and mercury. But its influence is waning, just when it is needed most.

As environment ministers of the world gather virtually this month to launch a year-long commemoration of the 50th anniversary of an institution that now has a staff of 1,200, UNEP must seize the opportunity to revivify.

I have studied UNEP for decades. Once, like many academics, I advocated that governments should 'upgrade' it to an agency on the scale of the World Health Organization. After poring over the archives of the meetings leading up to UNEP's founding and interviewing those involved, I am now convinced that UNEP should be small and nimble, a smart scaffold to bring together others with interrelated duties across, say, climate, pollution and biodiversity.

That was the vision of its founders. Five decades on – with more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, more people on the planet consuming more natural resources, and exacerbated nationalism hindering cooperation – an agency that fosters collaboration is even more necessary.

So what has gone wrong? Patchworks of environmental agencies and institutions – many of which UNEP created – claim separate pieces of the larger puzzle. Conservation efforts include conventions on wetlands, migratory species and biodiversity. Pollution conventions cover persistent organic pollutants, movement of hazardous wastes, and so on. Each focuses on a narrow mission that donors find easy to understand. Each unit, anxious to advertise its individual projects, resists coordination. UNEP's efforts have been sidelined. But the agency can reclaim its mandate.

UNEP's core financing, the Environment Fund, decreased by 37% from 1979 to 2019 – from US\$111 million to \$70 million (adjusted for inflation). Its overall income, however, has increased, to around \$500 million per year, the bulk earmarked for specific important activities, such as protecting the environment in conflict zones or making China's Belt and Road infrastructure-development initiative greener.

By executing many projects, UNEP dilutes its influence. Some dub it the UN Everything Programme. One staff

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member told me: "We are guilty of trying to be all things to all people." Another said: "We go where funding comes from, not where knowledge has accumulated and action is necessary." UNEP's authority and purpose is not in pursuing efforts in depth, but in bringing together disparate efforts into a common response.

UNEP must be, and be seen as, a resource that makes other agencies more effective. Here's how.

First, it should make its role as a connector more explicit. One way is to raise funds across institutions. For example, this January, France, the World Bank and the African Development Bank committed \$14 billion to the ambitious Great Green Wall initiative, which aims to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land in Africa's Sahel region, build an 8,000-kilometre corridor from Senegal to Djibouti and create 10 million green jobs by 2030. This supports a major restoration effort across multiple countries and institutions. That should be UNEP's default.

It should create formal partnerships spanning UN agencies. Informal partnerships are stymied because donors expect institutions to tout individual results; this encourages competition, not collaboration. Formal expectations shift the dynamics. A case in point: in 2010, the secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) partnered with intergovernmental agencies including the international police organization INTERPOL, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the World Bank, to combat wildlife crime. The initiative has secured more than \$20 million, benefiting all partners. By leading it, the CITES secretariat achieved what it could not alone. UNEP could do so, too. For example, it could set up a hub on food security across agencies working on biodiversity, climate change and land degradation.

Second, UNEP should become the authoritative scientific voice on the environment. That involves more than producing a static report every few years. It should pull together a dynamic platform to which environment ministers can go to learn, say, how climate regulations affect wetlands in their country, and what the major sources of degradation are. Think of it as a digital assistant for sustainability. As part of this, UNEP should establish a panel of global, transdisciplinary science advisers.

Finally, UNEP should craft a space for influencers and institutions to consult and collaborate. The UN Environment Assembly, UNEP's governing body, comprises all 193 UN member states. It must become the place where issues are voiced, law shaped and lasting coalitions constructed.

Sceptics will worry that UNEP might stifle efforts more than it synthesizes them, but in a complex world, lack of collaboration is the most stifling. If UNEP can be the convener, catalyst and the champion of Earth that it was created to be, the planet and its inhabitants will be better off.