

# THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## Summary

Environmental protection has become an increasingly important focus of activities for the United Nations over the last quarter century. More than 200 international environmental conventions now exist, and bodies such as the UN Environment Programme, the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the Global Environment Facility are playing increasingly important roles in international environmental management. But despite the proliferation of treaties and institutions, the health of the global environment continues to deteriorate. As encouraging as the growing involvement of many different United Nations bodies in environmental matters is, the price of success has been a measure of duplication and inefficiency. The UN's

environmental machinery will need to be both rationalized and strengthened if it is to become capable of reversing global ecological decline.

## **1. Introduction**

When the United Nations was created more than a half-century ago, environmental degradation was not even considered much of a national threat, let alone a pressing global problem that could provoke international conflict and undermine human health, economic well being, and social stability. Accordingly, the UN Charter does not even mention the word “environment.”

In the years since the UN system was built, environmental security has emerged alongside economic and military security as both a major pre-occupation of national decision-makers and a third pillar of international relations. Several developments account for this shift. One is the magnitude of the problems themselves. Such environmental threats as soil erosion, air and water pollution, over-fishing, and water scarcity now cost many countries as much as five to fifteen percent of their national income each year, according to the World Bank. What is more, environmental problems often do not respect national borders: wind currents, rainfall, rivers, and streams carry pollutants hundreds or even thousands of miles from their sources. DDT and PCBs, for instance, have been found throughout the Eskimos’ food chain in the Arctic, from snow, berries, and fish, to bears. On an even larger scale, the global environmental threats of ozone depletion, climate change, dwindling biological diversity, and ocean pollution threaten all nations. And recent research identifies population growth and resource scarcity as important factors in exacerbating social tensions and even provoking armed conflicts in some regions.

In order to confront proliferating environmental threats, countries have increasingly turned over the last few decades to the United Nations, the one body with the broad mandate and membership required to forge solutions to problems with an impact extending beyond national boundaries.

As early as the 1870s, countries occasionally sought to cooperate on issues such as protecting migratory bird species. But it was not until a century later that international environmental policymaking began to gather serious momentum. In particular, the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm marked the arrival of this subject as an international issue. Most notably, the conference created the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which is headquartered in Nairobi and serves as the main focal point for environmental issues within the UN system. It also set in motion negotiations toward a number of significant environmental conventions, including the 1972 “London Dumping Convention” on discharging wastes at sea, and the 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The second major milestone in international action on environmental issues was reached in June 1992, when more than a hundred heads of state gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as the “Earth Summit.” By this time, these issues had become truly global. Unlike many

earlier environmental conventions among a small number of neighboring countries, the climate and biological diversity conventions that emerged from the Rio conference cover concerns that are worldwide in scope.

Recognition had also grown that protecting the environment requires integrating ecological considerations into social, economic, and foreign policymaking. This integration is central to the concept of “sustainable development,” which seeks to meet current human needs while protecting the planet for future generations. The Rio conference marked the coming of age of this concept, the point at which it moved from the specialized literature to the front page and into the lexicon of governments and international agencies. In addition to the climate and biological diversity pacts, UNCED produced *Agenda 21*, a several hundred-page plan of action for sustainable development, and created the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to oversee the plan's implementation by international agencies, governments, and civil society worldwide.

Despite all of these efforts, the health of the Earth's natural systems has declined precipitously in the decades since the United Nations was created, and the pace of the reversal so far shows no signs of letting up. The world's climate is warming, ecosystems are being disrupted worldwide, fisheries are collapsing, and the Earth's forest cover continues to shrink. All of these trends have serious implications for human welfare, including diminished food for hungry people, drug varieties unavailable to cure cancer, destruction of traditional fishing communities, and the disappearance of numerous island countries, that are literally threatened with drowning in the rising seas resulting from global warming.

The need to protect the Earth's natural resources ranks high on the list of reasons the world will require stronger and more effective international institutions in the years ahead. As the century dawns, the time is ripe time to launch a far-reaching process of reform to equip the United Nations to mobilize the international effort required to reverse global ecological decline.

## **2. Making Environmental Treaties Work**

A good place to start is with the hundreds of agreements, declarations, and action plans, and international treaties on the environment that already exist. Environmental treaties now number more than 230; agreement on more than two-thirds of them has been reached since the first UN conference on the environment was held in Stockholm in 1972. (See Figure 1) These accords cover atmospheric pollution, ocean despoliation, endangered species, hazardous waste trade, and Antarctica, among other issues. The vast majority of environmental agreements are bilateral or regional in scope, involving, for instance, the management of river systems, air corridors, or migratory bird species. However, a minority of environmental issues—including the atmosphere, international waterways, and biological diversity—are truly global. The last few decades have seen steady progress toward developing international rules governing these “global commons.” (See Appendix)

Judging from the number of treaties, environmental diplomacy appears to have been a spectacular success. And many of these accords have in fact had important results. Among other achievements, air pollution in Europe has been reduced dramatically as a result of the 1979 treaty on transboundary air pollution; global chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) production has dropped nearly 90 percent from its peak in 1988 as a result of the 1987 Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion; the killing of elephants plummeted in Africa following a 1990 ban on commercial trade in ivory under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES); the annual whale take declined from more than 66 000 in 1961 to some 1 500 today as a result of agreements forged by the International Whaling Commission; and mining exploration and development have been forbidden in Antarctica for 50 years under a 1991 accord.

Yet even as the number of treaties climbs, the condition of the biosphere continues to deteriorate. As noted in earlier chapters, carbon-dioxide levels in the atmosphere have reached record highs, scientists are warning that we are in the midst of a period of mass extinction of species, the world's major fisheries are depleted, and water shortages loom worldwide. The notoriously slow pace of international diplomacy needs to be reconciled with the growing urgency of protecting the planet's life support systems.

## **2.1 Treaty Failures and Keys to Success**

Environmental treaties have so far mostly failed to turn around today's alarming environmental trends because the governments that created them have generally permitted only vague commitments and lax enforcement. Governments have also for the most part failed to provide sufficient funds to implement treaties, particularly in the developing world. Ironically, environmentalists need to take a page from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and push for international environmental commitments that are as specific, and enforceable as trade accords have become.

Reaching agreement on a treaty is only the first step. The real work involves updating it continuously in light of new scientific information or changing political circumstances, and ensuring that paper commitments are translated into real policy changes in countries around the world.

Environmental treaties rely heavily on transparency as an implementation tool. They generally require detailed reporting of actions taken at the national level to put agreements into practice. If this information is made freely available, then other countries as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can use it to shame countries into compliance.

But governments often fail to provide secretariats with accurate, complete, and timely information. Only 51 percent of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, for instance, had submitted the required reports as of March 1998. The record is somewhat better with other accords. As of fall 1998, 83 percent of the members of the UN climate change convention had filed the national communications required under the treaty. And 83 percent of the parties to the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion had reported data for 1996, although only 26 percent had submitted data for 1997.

The mini-institutions set up by each treaty play a key role in the implementation process. At a minimum, each treaty spawns a Conference Of the Parties (COP) and an Secretariat. The COPs are regular meetings of treaty members; they provide an opportunity to strengthen the agreement and review problems in implementation. Secretariats are small offices set up to service these meetings of governments. Environmental conventions also commonly include scientific bodies, which provide advice on new scientific and technological information relevant to the implementation of the accord.

Governments all too often give secretariats limited resources and authority. For instance, the Secretariats generally do not have the wherewithal or authority to verify the information that governments are supposed to supply on implementation efforts. A typical Secretariat has fewer than 20 staff and an annual budget of US\$ 211 million, a drop in the bucket compared with the budgets of U.S. federal agencies charged with implementing domestic environmental laws.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Hilary French** is Vice President for Research at the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit research organization that analyzes global environmental and development issues. In this capacity, she manages the Institute’s research program. Her own research and writing focuses on the role of international institutions in Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development, and on the integration of environmental concerns into international economic policymaking. Ms. French is the author of *Vanishing Borders: Protecting the Planet in the Age of Globalization*, published by W.W. Norton & Co. in 2000, and a co-author of nine of the Institute’s annual *State of the World* reports, among other publications. She has been interviewed by numerous radio and television stations, and lectured widely at conferences and universities in the United States and abroad. She holds degrees from Dartmouth College and from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.