Towards a more coherent institutional framework for the UN System’s Environmental Activities
Views and Role of the Regional Commissions

World Leaders attending the 2005 World Summit recognized the need for more efficient environmental activities in the UN system, with enhanced coordination, improved policy advice and guidance, strengthened scientific knowledge, assessment and cooperation and better treaty compliance. They agreed to explore the possibility of a more coherent institutional framework to address this need. Informal consultations within the General Assembly followed and are currently undergoing under the co-chairmanship of the ambassadors of Mexico and Switzerland.

Since some of the issues discussed in this context have implications for the follow-up and implementation of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPoI - WSSD) and the Agenda 21 (UNCED), as well as for the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) process established for their follow-up. In that connection, they are of direct relevance to the work of the regional commissions, with potential impact on their programme activities. The present paper submits the views of the commissions on some of these aspects and highlights the role of the commissions in some areas.

I. The Paradigm of “Sustainable Development

In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it

(Rio, Principle 4)

All states and all people shall cooperate in the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, in order to reduce the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world

(Rio, Principle 5)

The international community has come a long way to reach a common global understanding on the concept of “sustainable development” that now figures prominently on the agenda of all significant international development initiatives, in particular the major UN conferences and summits. This new paradigm was recognized globally in Rio Summit in 1992 and was further strengthened at the five-year review of the Summit outcomes (notably agenda 21 and Rio Declaration) as well as in the Johannesburg Summit (WSSD/September 2002). This strengthened paradigm took the international community well beyond the traditional compartmentalized treatment of environment and development concerns, advanced a more holistic approach and, ever since, has been instrumental in enhancing cooperation between developed and developing countries on a common denominator for sustainable development.

The Johannesburg Summit (WSSD) called for strengthened institutional framework for sustainable development at all levels and underlined that the three interdependent pillars of sustainable development must be treated in a balanced and mutually reinforcing manner. The commissions believe, therefore, that it is crucial that the effort to strengthen one pillar should be matched by corresponding enhancement of the other two pillars. This would also help ensure balanced approach through global, regional and interregional partnerships, to advance the MDGs and the goals of sustainable development.

The UN Commission of Sustainable Development (CSD) was established in the wake of Rio Summit to monitor and advance the implementation of Agenda 21 and other Rio outcomes. The world leaders
further underlined in the JPoI that the CSD remain the “high-level policy forum” to advance the sustainable development agenda. DESA is mandated to provide servicing to the CSD deliberations, and for regional implementation, regional commissions have been the substantive and technical catalysts.

II. The Regional Dimension and the Role of Regional Commissions

Acknowledgments and mandates

The regional dimension of promoting sustainable development was strongly recognized in UNCED (Section 4, Chapter 38) and constantly reaffirmed thereafter. In view of their strategic positioning, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) called upon the Regional Commissions of the United Nations and other regional institutions to, inter alia, promote the integration of environmental concerns in regional and sub-regional development policies. Regional bodies were also requested to consider improving regional and sub-regional consultative processes to facilitate the exchange of data, information and experience in the implementation of Agenda 21. WSSD strengthened this mandate and tasked the Regional Commissions to facilitate and promote a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development into their work, and into the work of regional, sub-regional and other bodies. It was indicated that this could be done by facilitating and strengthening the exchange of experiences, including national experiences, best practices, case studies and partnership experiences related to the implementation of Agenda 21.

In 2003, the General Assembly called upon the Regional Commissions to take action to ensure the effective implementation of and follow-up on the outcomes of WSSD (GA Res. 58/218 of 23 December 2003, reaffirmed by Res. 59/227 of 22 December 2004). The General Assembly welcomed the decision of the CSD at its eleventh session, to invite the Regional Commissions, in collaboration with the Secretariat of the Commission, to consider organizing regional implementation meetings (RIMs) in order to contribute to the work of the Commission. The RIMs have been since an important catalyst in the preparation of the CSD sessions, including the recent CSD 14.

The regional commissions as regional UN assets: what do we offer?

The regional Commissions are mandated to address social and economic issues, and to some extent environmental issues, especially those of trans-boundary concerns in their regions. They have thus developed strong institutional multi-disciplinary skills and expertise in the service of their Member States. The unique nature of the regional commissions’ work endow themselves with the comparative advantage of having the capacity to link the social and economic development issues towards integration of the three pillars of sustainable development through harnessing and synergizing regional perspectives. This proved most relevant to both the national and global policy setting.

The commissions also provide a neutral, universal and unique regional platform for integration of the three pillars of sustainable development through their cross-sectoral approach to environmental challenges. The neutral convening power of the regional commissions proved most effective in bridging the gap between the global and national levels by providing regional perspectives to the global review of the implementation of internationally agreed goals, and by bringing the UN global commitments, principles and values to the regional level. They have been holding various high-level consultations and policy dialogues to identify specific concerns and measures to further strengthen regional cooperation and promote regionally tailored response to address environmental and socio-economic issues.
The regional fora include ministerial conferences (e.g. ESCAP’s regional mandate of convening Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development (MCED) and promoting a “Green Growth” approach, the “Environment for Europe” Ministerial process in the ECE region, establishment of the Africa-CSD (ACSD) by the Ministers for Economic and social Development and Planning in Africa); and the regional implementation meetings (RIMs) in support of the CSD work (organized by all regional commissions in cooperation with other regional institutional stakeholders). Other fora include interagency mechanisms for coordination at the regional level like UN-Water, UN-Energy, etc (ECA, for e.g. serves as the secretariat of UN-Water/Africa, UN-Energy/Africa and UN-Biotech Africa), and meetings to coordinate regional responses to natural disasters (for instance, ESCAP’s efforts following the Tsunami disaster).

In addition to their pool and capacity of cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary skills and expertise, and their convening power, the regional commissions play an important role in promoting environmental norms and conventions in their respective regions. As recognized by the Summit that better treaty compliance was a central consideration, experiences showed that regional approaches to the development and implementation of conventions can be more effective in certain instances, especially on issues of trans-boundary nature.

For instance, the ECE conventions and their associated protocols constitute a legal backbone for improving the environment in the region. The ECE, through its Environmental Performance Review Programme (EPR), has been providing in-depth advice to countries with economies in transition to improve their environmental performance. The Regional commissions have also been collaborating to support global efforts on environmental issues, such as ECE and ESCAP collaboration on SPECA and the European Water Protocol, and the latter collaboration with ECLAC on assessing impacts of natural disasters. ESCAP was the first initiator of the Mekong River basin programme and ECA was instrumental in the adoption of the Bamako Convention on Hazardous Wastes and the revision of the Algiers Convention on Nature and Natural Resources.

III. Coordination, integration and coherence in “policy development” on environmental aspects of sustainable development

A rich and diversified UN expertise

The environmental dimension of sustainable development is increasingly linked to many other socio-economic development and cross-cutting issues such as economic growth, finance, trade, health, technology and gender issues. The fact that a number of actors are involved in the policy development in these areas should not be, therefore, seen merely through a duplicative or overlapping perspective. All these actors, ranging from UN entities to Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) have their legally autonomous and dedicated technical and policy development fora and mechanisms which provide guidance to the work of those entities. More importantly, most of them have an important value added through their accumulated and specialized technical expertise that could be harnessed in a coherent framework of cooperation. Hence, efforts to achieve more coherence in the environmental activities of the UN system should build on the technically rich and diversified context of the UN system. There are indeed ample opportunities for the UN agencies to complement each other’s work by enhancing cooperation and joint action.

1 These include the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution; Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Trans-boundary Context; Convention on the Protection and Use of Trans-boundary Watercourses and International Lakes, and the Arhus Convention.
Coordination and coherence at regional level

The need for coordination and cooperation and strive for coherence at the regional level have been strongly recognized and advocated since UNCED. Agenda 21 stipulates, for instance, that “the regional commissions, as appropriate, should play a leading role in coordinating regional and sub-regional activities by sectoral and other UN bodies and shall assist countries in achieving sustainable development”. Active cooperation and collaboration between the regional commissions and other regional organizations was emphasized. It was also stressed that “UNEP and UNDP, together with the regional commissions, would have a crucial role to play, especially in providing the necessary assistance, with particular emphasis on building and strengthening the national capacity of Member States”. The regional commissions have been active players in promoting cooperation and coherence at the global, regional and subregional levels.

As members of the UN global coordination machinery, including CEB, UNDG, EC-ESA and the Environment Management Group (EMG), as well as their various committees and working groups, the commissions have been providing regional perspective of environmental challenges and promoting the integrated approach among the three sustainable development pillars. As members of both UNDG and EC-ESA, the commissions advocate, in particular, the establishment of strengthened linkages and means of cooperation between the two mechanisms as a means to improving coherence between the normative and analytical work of the UN system on one hand, and its operational activities, notably in this context the environmental activities, on the other hand.

In addition to their support of the various UN inter-agency mechanisms dealing with sustainable development issues at the regional level, the regional commissions have close collaboration with UNEP and other regional organizations in support of their Member States. For instance, ECA collaborated closely with UNEP for the establishment of an Expanded Joint Secretariat (EJS) comprising ECA, UNEP, OAU, ADB, UNDP, Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Southern African Development Community (SADC). It was the EJS that guided and facilitated the overall preparatory process in Africa for WSSD, including the hosting of the African Regional Preparatory Conference held at the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, October 2001. ECA also collaborated with the then OAU (now AU) and UNEP in establishing the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN).

Similarly, ESCWA had closely cooperated with UNEP/ROWA and the League of Arab States (LAS) through a joint technical secretariat established to follow-up on the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. ESCWA and LAS are actively cooperating on this follow-up and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Initiative in the Arab Region, including through collaborative capacity-building efforts in the Arab countries.

In the ECLAC region, the Interagency Technical Committee in Latin America brings together UNDP, ECLAC, UNEP, WB and the IADB. Examples of more task-oriented mechanisms include the interagency coordination for the regional follow-up of the Millennium Development Goals in Latin America and the Caribbean and the metadata working group between ECLAC and UNEP-ROLAC.

ESCAP, as chair of the Regional Coordination Meeting promoting system coherence, has established a regional thematic working group on Environment and disaster management. This working group is
co-chaired by UNEP, ESCAP and OCHA, and includes FAO, ILO, ITU, UNCCD, UNCRD, UNESCO, UNIDO, UNDP, WHO, World Bank, and OHCHR, who collaborate on regional follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals in the areas of environment and sustainable development, as well as on measures for mitigating natural disasters.

Important sub-regional initiatives for the environment and sustainable development have also taken place or are under way. For instance, the ECE cooperates closely on, among others, the Environment Strategy for countries of Eastern Europe Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) and the South-East Europe and the Mediterranean initiative on the introduction of integrated water resources management. ESCAP is the secretariat of the North-East Asia Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation. The secretariat is facilitating governments’ dialogues to promote trans-boundary energy cooperation in North-East Asia and promote dialogue among Government of Central Asia to develop programs on energy and water within the framework of the Special Programme for Economies in Central Asia (SPECA).

**Technical assistance by the regional commissions: linking the normative to the operational**

In their efforts to developing national capacity in their member countries, and raising greater awareness among the policy makers towards the integration of environmental concerns into sectoral policies, the regional commissions have been providing *technical assistance* through regional advisory services, capacity-building workshops, and pilot projects to assist the countries in the region to adopt strategies for sustainable development and for their implementation. While limited in scope compared to other larger scale operational environmental activities, the commissions’ technical support provide good examples in the UN system for fostering coherence between the normative, analytical and operational work.

Examples of the technical support provided by the commissions include support for integrating environmental dimensions in national economic development plans; establishment and institutionalization of environment impact assessment policies; design of environmental monitoring systems including the selection of environmental indicators for decision-making; as well as preparation of proposals and project documents to secure funds for sustainable development projects. In addition, the regional commissions are currently cooperating together, and with other regional stakeholders to implement projects on Capacity building in several areas of concern relevant for sustainable development.

**Conclusion**

The regional dimension should be strengthened in striving towards a more coherent institutional framework for the UN system’s environmental activities. The paradigm of sustainable development should be preserved and enhanced as a result of these ongoing efforts. The regional commissions play an important role on both aspects. They are committed to continue working with their UN and other partners and stakeholders to promote coherence in the environmental activities of the UN system, notably at the regional level. In this, they are offering their assets for wider use by member states and the other UN agencies working in their respective regions. They hope that the use of those assets would be further optimized and build upon as a result of the move towards more coherence within the UN system.