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## Federal Office for the Environment FOEN

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### The swiss view on international environmental governance: Strong institutions and clear goals

**Several hundred multilateral agreements and international organisations are dedicated to the protection of the environment – but degradation of the global environment continues. This is due partly to a lack of political will, but also to institutional shortcomings within the environmental governance system. What can be done to make the machinery more effective and efficient?**

*Hansjakob Baumgartner*

In 1794, the United Kingdom signed the Jay Treaty with its former colony, the United States of America, thereby resolving a number of issues left over from the American War of Independence. One issue of concern was the Great Lakes that formed the border between the US and Canada, which remained under British rule. Here, rudimentary water protection provisions were introduced. It was the first time that environmental matters had been regulated by an agreement between two nations.

Similar agreements, also concerned with questions of water law, were concluded in the 19th century. In each case, they covered only a limited area and involved only a small number of countries.



 Headquarters of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi. UNEP is the only UN entity that has its seat in a developing country.  
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**Stockholm 1972.** This limited approach remained the case until well into the 20th century. However, at this time the global dimension and interdependence of the environmental challenges became increasingly recognised. This awareness was reflected by the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. That same year, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was established, with headquarters in Nairobi.

The first global environmental agreements also date back to this period: thus, the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat was signed in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971. And, in recognition of the need for global action to protect the stratospheric ozone layer, the Montreal Protocol, in which it was agreed to phase out the production of ozone-depleting CFCs, was signed in 1987.

**Rio 1992.** A milestone in the further development of the international environmental regime was the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, where Conventions on Climate Change, Biological Diversity and Desertification were signed and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was established.

Today, several hundred multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) exist, as well as other agreements relevant to the environment. In 2001, the total number was reported by UNEP to be 502. They were developed on an ad hoc basis, without reference to other existing agreements and in an uncoordinated manner.

**Proliferation of agreements and institutions.** Each agreement has its own secretariat, technical working groups and regular sessions of the Conference of the Parties (COP). In addition, numerous other environmental organisations, bodies and programmes have emerged - again, largely in the absence of a coherent strategy.

The result is a system that is bewildering even for specialists. Franz Perrez, head of the Global Affairs Section of the FOEN, says: "Today's environmental regime has become overcomplicated while at the same time gaps still remain. There is no overall perspective and a lack of a strong authoritative central pillar that could ensure coherence."

The shortcomings of the system can be summarised as follows:

- **The environmental regime is fragmented, with a plethora of agreements and**

**institutions:** This causes unnecessary costs and leads to duplication, contradictions and turf battles. In addition, given the large number of international meetings, effective participation has become almost impossible, particularly for developing countries: in 2006, the three Rio Conventions alone had 230 meeting days.

- **There is a dilution of authority, and many decisions affecting the environment are taken outside of the core environmental regime:** The decisions of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) often have a greater impact on environmental sustainability than decisions taken by many bodies within the core environmental governance system.
- **There is an imbalance between the environmental regime and other international regimes:** The environmental regime establishes typically weaker and less precise obligations than, for example, the international trade regime established by the WTO, and effective dispute settlement or compliance procedures are missing. Moreover, UNEP lacks the resources that are available to the World Bank or the UNDP, and it has not succeeded in establishing itself as the central forum for decision-making processes in the environmental field.
- **There is no authoritative institution capable of providing environmental leadership:** While UNEP does excellent work in monitoring and assessment, and in developing environmental agreements, it is not in a position to manage policy processes in a coherent and coordinated manner. Its authority is weakened by the fact that it has only limited formal membership as its Governing Council has a rotating membership of 58 countries elected by the General Assembly. Its human and financial resources are also limited.
- **The resources available for environmental protection are inadequate:** There is generally inadequate financial and technical support for the implementation of effective environmental policies. Moreover, resources are often inefficiently managed as a result of duplication and a lack of synergies within the environmental governance system.
- **There is a lack of political will:** Despite universal and repeated expressions of general commitments to environmental protection and the principle of sustainability, policymakers and society still lack a willingness to set the priorities accordingly and to take concrete action. Agreements are often not ratified or inadequately implemented. This problem cannot be eliminated by reforming the environmental governance system alone. Nevertheless, a strong and effective system of international environmental governance could help to promote the political will for action.

**Reform programme.** These problems have been recognised, and a number of solutions have been proposed. In 2002, the Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GMEF) in Cartagena (Colombia) adopted a package of measures designed to strengthen international environmental governance, which was endorsed the same year at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. This included the following measures:

- improving coherence in international environmental policymaking by strengthening UNEP, including by considering universal membership of UNEP's Governing Council;
- securing more financial resources for UNEP;
- improving coordination among and the effectiveness of MEAs;
- supporting technology transfer, capacity building and country-level coordination;
- enhancing coordination across the UN system.



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**Improving environmental governance.** The Cartagena decision represented the most substantial reform effort yet undertaken.

Switzerland was the main promoter of the package of measures aimed at promoting coherence and cooperation. It also contributed to various other decisions, especially with regard to the political strengthening of UNEP and the improvement of its financial basis. However, after a promising start, efforts to implement the measures began to founder.

This coincided with an initiative launched by the French President Jacques Chirac at the 2003 UN General Assembly, proposing that UNEP should be expanded to form a World Environment -Organisation - along the same lines as the UN -organisations concerned with health (WHO) or food and agriculture (FAO). For many countries, this proposal went too far. While Switzerland essentially supports this vision, it has always stressed that the transformation of the Programme into an Organisation would not in itself solve the actual problems.

**Enhancing synergies.** Bottom-up approaches appear to be more promising. Progress in this respect has been achieved with a successful Swiss initiative to co-locate the secretariats of all the chemicals and waste conventions in Geneva - the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade (PIC), the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal.

Switzerland went on to call for further integration, with the goal of a joint management structure of the three secretariats in the chemicals and waste cluster and enhanced coherence and synergies in decision-making and implementation. These efforts have borne fruit: in 2010, the three conventions will be holding a simultaneous extraordinary Conference of the Parties for the first time, thereby creating a precedent for international environmental governance. Franz Perrez comments: "The chemicals and waste cluster is now regarded as a model for effective, efficient and coherent international environmental policy."

**Establishing global goals.** To be effective, environmental governance requires more than smoothly running institutions with adequate authority - clearly defined goals are equally indispensable. At the 2006 Global Ministerial Environment Forum in Dubai, the Swiss President and Environment Minister Moritz Leuenberger suggested that global environmental goals should be established, with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) serving as a model. These goals are to be achieved by 2015.

Although it is foreseeable that the MDGs will not be achieved within the specified time frame, they have had an impact on development policy. They have focused global attention on the most pressing social problems and helped to prioritise and give a coherent orientation to development efforts.

As Daniel Ziegerer of the FOEN Global Affairs Section emphasises, global environmental goals would not need to be newly defined: "They can be found in the resolutions of environmental conferences held in recent years, or in the articles stating the purpose of multilateral environmental agreements. What's lacking is their crystallisation in a consistent political programme." The general goals of a programme of this kind would need to be pertinent and comprehensible. These goals would be broken down into targets, giving rise to measures and obligations. The targets would require quantifiable indicators for monitoring progress in implementation, and if possible a time frame should also be specified.

Specific targets are also already contained in existing agreements and other commitments - for example, the objectives of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010, or achieving sound management of chemicals worldwide by 2020.

Daniel Ziegerer comments: "Clearly defined goals are a good way of securing greater commitment from the international community, focusing joint efforts, raising public awareness of the issues, highlighting progress and deficiencies, and also generating new means of implementation. They would help to strengthen the institutions of the global environmental regime and effectively improve governance."

### Switzerland's key positions

- Switzerland supports a comprehensive, coherent, effective and efficient international environmental governance with the following functions:
  - providing adequate scientific information;
  - providing policy guidance;
  - catalysing and supporting implementation.

This requires:

- strong institutions, including an authoritative central pillar able to provide overarching policy guidance;
- more and stronger institutional and political cooperation, coordination and synergies within the different thematic clusters such as chemicals and waste;
- strengthened political and financial support for the further development of the international environmental regime and its implementation;
- the formulation of a set of clear goals, targets and indicators to assess progress.

Contact: [magazine@bafu.admin.ch](mailto:magazine@bafu.admin.ch)

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**Further information**

[The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development \(UNCED\), in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 on Wikipédia](#) [↗](#)

[Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation REDD](#) [↗](#)

[United nations Millennium Development Goals](#) [↗](#)

[Commission on Sustainable Development CSD](#) [↗](#)

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