

UNEO: A Champion for environment in the 21st Century, but what role for stakeholders?

~a multi-stakeholder conversation co-organized by the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), Stakeholder Forum and ANPED ~

On 3 May, 2007 more than 25 representatives of civil society and the private sector met with representatives of the French government in New York to discuss the reform of international environmental governance (IEG) and, in particular, the idea of transforming the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) into a United Nations Environment Organisation (UNEO). The meeting provided participants with an update on developments in IEG reform, as well as an opportunity to discuss possible models for engaging stakeholders in a UNEO.

The meeting opened with presentations by the French government on the process of IEG reform to date and where they expect it go in the foreseeable future. Two representatives of civil society made presentations on possible models for stakeholder engagement in a UNEO, as well as the case for its justification. Following the presentations, the floor was opened for discussion. Questions were asked regarding the forthcoming process of reform. Other models for stakeholder engagement were put forward and discussed by participants.

The meeting signaled a clear call for civil society to further work on considering the substance of a UNEO model, including options for stakeholder engagement. It was generally agreed that many models of stakeholder engagement exist in the international arena, and that an exercise of review needs to be undertaken to learn from these experiences and identify best practices which could be considered in designing a model for a UNEO.

The State of Play

Participants were informed that a ‘Group of Friends of the United Nations Environment Organisation (UNEO)’ had been formed to support the upgrade of UNEP into a UNEO in the context of reform at the United Nations. Two meetings of the group had taken place already: one, in Paris in February 2007, and the second, in Agdar in April 2007. A third meeting is planned in Costa Rica for November 2007. At present, the group is composed of 53 governments – 26 of which are from the South. It is hoped that civil society can become a more active player in the group as the process moves ahead, possibly beginning with a more active role at the upcoming meeting in Costa Rica.

It was reported that there may be a formal process established within the General Assembly (GA) to take the process forward. The report of the recent General Assembly informal consultations on the environment, led by the Ambassadors of Switzerland and

Mexico, is soon expected. It is likely that the report will shed some light on ideas regarding strengthening UNEP and the possibility of a UNEO. It was explained that the release of this report could open the way for an evolution of the GA consultations into a more formal process. This process would preferably be established in the next session of the GA (62nd Session).

Civil Society Presentations

The first speaker noted the inherent diversity and variety of civil society, emphasizing that civil society does not speak with one voice and its views cannot be channeled into one statement. He argued that UNEP has failed to recognize this diversity and integrate it into its system of engagement. By comparison, the speaker noted that the approach of the Commission on Sustainable Development, where civil society is divided into nine 'Major Groups', enables a multitude of voices to be heard by allowing for both shared and individual statements. The presenter said that few systems of engagement function as interactively and democratically as the CSD, and that any model of engagement in a UNEO must recognize the diversity of civil society. Moreover, the presenter noted that the greater engagement is with civil society in a UNEO, the more successful it will be. He explained that engagement will allow – at the very least – for greater dissemination of information and improved follow-up, implementation and monitoring.

The second speaker presented other models of stakeholder engagement which could offer examples for engagement in a UNEO, including the model used at the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) held in Istanbul in 1996. At Habitat II, stakeholders were allowed to insert text into the outcome document directly as long as a government endorsed it. The intention was to give Major Groups seats in a new body, but was later rejected.

Noting that the governing bodies of UNAIDS, the Global Fund and the ILO all have representatives of civil society on their governing boards, the speaker suggested that seats for Major Groups on the governing board of a new UNEO or a strengthened UNEP could be an interesting idea. He explained that in his view, we are in an era of 'stakeholder democracy,' therefore institutions need to better bring skills, advice and expertise to the table. Other ways of achieving this might be the development of Global Public Policy Networks around different sections of the new organization to advise the development of activities on the ground. National Public Policy Networks or Sustainable Development councils could bring advice at the national level. The speaker closed by noting that there is no shortage of creative models to look at when thinking about how to engage civil society.

Discussion

Other models of stakeholder engagement worthy of further exploration were presented in more details during the discussion, including the International Labour Organization and the Aarhus Convention.

Participants generally cautioned against the replication of the CSD or UNEP model of engagement in a UNEO. One participant suggested that any new model must be, above all, flexible and allow for a lot of consultation. Participants generally agreed that within other international forums, there are many examples of stakeholder engagement which could be drawn upon in designing a model of engagement for a UNEO. It was suggested that to this end, a matrix of models could be developed to evaluate strengths and weaknesses. Such an exercise would allow the international community to learn from experiences of stakeholder engagement in order to build a robust model for a UNEO, which could be either a hybrid of other models or new in itself.

The Way Forward

One suggestion on the table for more immediate action on the part of civil society was the formation of a 'Friends of the Group of Friends of the UNEO.' This group could support government efforts to achieve this aim and to provide input on UNEO development, particularly related to stakeholder engagement.

Meeting organizers ANPED, Stakeholder Forum and UN-NGLS – in collaboration and consultation with interested and relevant civil society organizations - will initiate work to develop a matrix on stakeholder engagement models for input into the formulation of what the UNEO might look like.

There was also a call for the representatives of civil society to make their views on the topic known to a wide variety of governments so as to shift the overall balance of the IEG debate. A suggestion that a meeting between the Group of Friends and NGOs could be organized at a later date to progress on a model of engagement of civil society with a UNEO was made as well.