

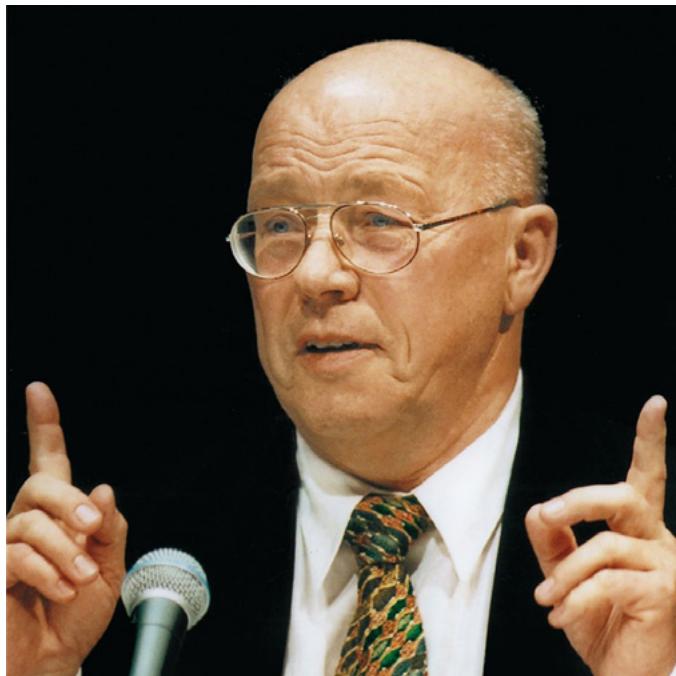


# United Nations Environment Programme

50th Anniversary

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# United Nations Environment Programme

## 50th Anniversary

Anniversaries occasionally offer an opportunity to reflect deeply on the past and imagine a better future. Fifty years ago, in 1972, a globally important environmental event took place: the „United Nations Environment Programme“ (UNEP) was established. And now, in 2022, the first full-length book on the world's leading environmental institution can be read (Ivanova 2022).

The book builds on the efforts of very many people who created international institutions, and often laboured hard to ensure that they function well. The author met most of the founders, the leaders, and the operatives of the global environmental governance system – and so she wants to offer the full story, especially the untold story of their legacy.

Accordingly, the „cast of characters“ presents thirty-nine people offering strong insights about UNEP and the system of global environmental governance. It starts with Inger Andersen, the Under-Secretary-General of the UN and current Executive Director of UNEP, includes Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-Moon, the Secretary-Generals of the UN, Elisabeth Dowdeswell, the first female UNEP Director, Christiana Figueres, the former Executive Secretary of the UN Climate Convention, Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Gus Speth, the founder of the World Resources Institute and Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Mostafa Tolba, the longest-serving UNEP-Director, and Achim Steiner and Klaus Töpfer, the two German Executive Directors of UNEP, to name just a few.

„UNEP at Fifty“ is a biography that explains the origin and formative years of the institution, elucidates its successes, crises and turning points, and presents a view on its possible future. In so doing, the author wants to record previously untold stories, to correct misunderstandings and to reveal the life within what is often considered a „lifeless bureaucracy“; no doubt,

she is a good old friend of UNEP. So her criticism is restrained, and her demands regarding the future can not be expected to be radical.

The creation of UNEP was the most visible and enduring outcome of the first global environmental summit, the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. The outcome was often called a „small, smart, and nimble“ anchor institution for the global environment, with headquarters in far-away Nairobi, Kenya. Its *raison d'être* was defined as coordination of environmental activities in the UN system; in addition it was expected to produce scientific assessments of the state of the global environment, and to provide technical and policy analysis. UNEP was to be a normative body, not an operational or service organization conducting specific environmental activities of its own.

UNEP has grown modestly over the five decades from a small unit in Nairobi to an organization of about 1,200 staff in forty-five duty stations in forty-three countries, most of them however with only a very few employees. UNEP's financial resources have been and still are very limited; they comprise the regular UN budget allocations plus voluntary contributions and earmarked contributions from UN member states. Although its overall income had grown to \$ 570 million in 2018, some 87 percent of it came from extra-budgetary resources that respond primarily to donor preferences – and so heavily limit the organization's initiatives.

For many years after the Stockholm conference the major constitutional constraints on the institution and its inadequate funding had led to occasionally heated debates: Is UNEP weak and insufficient or has it been an outstanding success? Much of the global environmental governance literature assumes that UNEP was deliberately designed to be weak, that industry and governments saddled UNEP with its form, function and financing in order to incapacitate it. After 50 years of existence, this assumption could be called irrelevant.

Very relevant however is the question of how to make UNEP effective now – and relevant for the future.

From the very beginning UNEP was accompanied by discussions on necessary reform. The potential reforms could be marginal or fundamental, and it is interesting to see which of them came under consideration. Kofi Annan, the seventh UN General-Secretary, in 2002 published a remarkable book; three German scholars came out with specific proposals: Andreas Rechkemmer with a book on an „Environment and Development Organization“ (UNEO), and Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer with a book on „A World Environment Organization“ (WEO).

A strong push in this direction came from the conference „Citizens of the Earth“ in Paris, 2007. Point 2 of its concluding resolution stated: „In Rio, Johannesburg, Montreal and Kyoto, the international community has moved forward. But we need to go further...“ In point 7 then came the demanding conclusion: „We call for the transformation of UNEP into a fully-fledged international organization that is genuinely universal. Modelled on the World Health Organization (WHO), the new United Nations Environment Organization (UNEO) could be a strong voice with global recognition“.

This „Paris Call for Action“ was certainly heard but not implemented. So the dispute on the best institutional solution is still going on. Here, three different model-types compete with one another: The first model is to re-cast the subsidiary organ UNEP as a specialized agency – along the lines of the WHO (World Health Organization) or the ILO (International Labour Organization). The second model goes much further. As we now have more than 500 international environmental agreements, and a considerable number of UN Environmental Conventions, it is suggested that all this should be integrated into one comprehensive „Global Environment Organization“ (GEO) – preferably along the lines of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The third model proposed is a hierarchical international organization, based on the principle of majority decision-making, with power of enforcement over nation states who do not agree with the decisions made. This model comes close to the model of the European Union (EU).



*UNEP UNEA 5.2 – Reactions of Plastic Resolution  
(credit: Duncan Moore)*

At present, however, it is not at all clear which of these models will carry the day.

Over the years, UNEP has produced and supported numerous high-quality scientific reports and urged for a strong policy response. The reports on chemical pollution set the standard for environmental health criteria for very many chemicals. The first integrated environment assessment, the „Global Environment Outlook“ (GEO) published in 1997, became the flagship publication on the environment, being released every five years, and has now reached its sixth edition. In the field of climate change, UNEP's reports and its collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) set the stage for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). However, both these important institutions were not located at the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, but in Geneva and in Bonn.

One can mourn these and other developments in the history of UNEP. A very serious one is, that the need of assistance for environmental activities at the local level remained largely unfulfilled – and vice versa: UNEP did not intensively and regularly ask local communities around the world what they saw as important and momentous. A concrete procedure could help to get out of this pitfall: UNEP should try to learn from UNICEF.

These two institutions are very different but both are addressing global problems: one the safety of the environment, the other the safety of children. In doing so, UNICEF is a global and a local institution at the same time. It is present in more than 190 countries of the world, with annual expenditures of more than 5.4 billion US dollars. (In Germany, for instance, UNICEF has more than 200 local groups, is permanently supported by more than 8000 honorary members, and has an annual expenditure of more than 120 million Euro). By contrast, UNEP seems to have no such local groups and honorary members, and is broadly known only by academics, journalists and government officials. And that could mean that UNEP, the „anchor institution for the global environment“, in actual fact has no effective anchorage on the local level, the level where most of the effects of global problems are felt first.

It would be more pleasant to look at length at UNEP's seven major fields of activity: Ozone Depletion, Marine Pollution, Desertification, Chemicals and Hazardous Waste, Climate Change, Biodiversity, and Forests – but here a few comments must suffice.

UNEP's major success in global environmental governance it seems, was the reversal of the depletion of the ozone layer, following the Montreal Protocol. Work on marine ecosystems was among the first topic initiatives, starting in 1974 with the „Regional Seas Programme“ which included fourteen regions and more than 140 nation states. On desertification, UNEP invested considerable resources in research and assessment, but it took until 1994 to sign the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, ending with a curious locational decision: The secretariat of this convention was first located in Geneva, and in 1999 moved to Bonn – cities in two countries where so far no desertification has emerged.

Climate change was on the international agenda already before the 1972 Stockholm conference. However, it was not until 1979 that on basis of collaboration of UNEP and other organizations „a world conference of experts on climate and mankind“ – the first World Climate Conference – was convened in Geneva. The climate issue received high prominence after that, and

many meetings took place. In December 2021, Glasgow convened the 26th conference of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 26). UNEP's key goal in this regime is the global transition to low carbon, resource-efficient, equitable, and sustainable development. Climate change is now an overarching global concern and has a strong convention secretariat in Bonn – not in Nairobi, and not in Geneva.

Over time, UNEP became also a major player in international biodiversity research and conservation. In 2019, the „Global Assessment Report“ on these topics stated that globally one million species are at risk of extinction. The institutional landscape for biodiversity however is much too complex to be effective, with a dozen conventions and protocols. Therefore, in 1989, some governments asked UNEP to develop a framework convention with the purpose of rationalizing existing activities. From the very beginning of the negotiations for such an integrated Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), barriers were built, some by UN agencies, others by member states. Unlike with ozone and climate change, here a strong body of scientific evidence was still lacking, and old tensions between the North and the South came up again. Meanwhile a sad question is prominent: How serious must the biodiversity crises become before unified action takes place?

A similar melancholic mood comes up when one looks at the global forests. Institutional development of global forest policy was a dramatic-play, not a success-story. At the 1992 Rio-Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) it was possible to agree on a climate, a biodiversity, and a desertification convention, but no consensus was reached on a forest convention. For the following three years, there was total silence on that issue. But then came a great mess: three temporary institutions following each other, starting with the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF), 1995 - 1997, followed by the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF), 1997-2001, and then the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), 2001-2005. IPF and IFF presented a broad palette of suggestions on sustainable forest management, but didn't find a consensus for an integrated global forest strategy. UNFF

had a higher status, but didn't reach a consensus on a convention with a triple goal system: protection of forests, sustainable use of forests, and an increase in global forest stock. This episode ended as UNFFinished business.

A little hope, however, spread around the world with the study by a group of scientists at ETH Zürich in 2019 on „The global tree restoration potential“. According to this computer-based assessment the current 2.8 billion hectares of global forests could easily and without major conflicts be extended to 4.4 billion hectares. So far, at the global level nothing in this direction has been started. By contrast, in October 2019, a poor African country succeeded in a nation-wide effort to plant 354 million trees in just one day.

Will the 2022 anniversary of UNEP help to take up new opportunities? The „forest option“, no doubt, is highly significant for global climate policy. It is an essential part of „nature-based solutions“ (NBCs) for global environment problems, together with moors, croplands, grasslands, terrestrial and coastal wetlands, and urban greenery. Any major activity of UNEP on the issue of nature-based solutions for practical environment policy would be welcome.

## Conclusions

Anniversaries occasionally do produce new opportunities. In 2022, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the „United Nations Environment Programme“. This institution has learned over time, but as it stands now, UNEP cannot, I fear, prevent further environmental decline of the global ecosystems, not to speak of their renaturation. The debate on necessary reforms of UNEP has been quite intense, and radical proposals have been many - but they were not implemented rigorously.

UNEP is still a subsidiary organ within the UN General Assembly, and not a more powerful specialized agency, with sufficient staff and sufficient funds. UNEP is still a „far-distant institution“, not really reaching the local citizen – unlike UNICEF, which is a strong locally based institution. In view of the serious negative ecological trends and the continuing global overshoot, UNEP seems to have „fallen out of time“.

Of course, almost anything that focuses critical attention on UNEP and the environment internationally is a positive. But should the „old times“ continue, sooner or later a drastic institutional revolution in global environmental governance may become inevitable. This structural change could reach from turning the existing subsidiary organ „United Nations Environment Programme“ (UNEP) into a specialized agency, the „United Nations Environment Agency“ (UNEA), into an „Environment and Development Organization“ (UNEO), or into a „World Environment Organization“ (WEO).

If none of these models comes into existence in time, the minimal future reform should at least consist of a stronger engagement regarding functions, effectiveness and public standing of UNEP. Such a minor reform could easily be initiated by the United Nations Environment Assembly - or by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres himself. It seems that the necessary ecological consciousness for an innovative initiative exists, as his provocative, historic address at Columbia University testifies.

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## Literature

Maria Ivanova: The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution. UNEP at Fifty, Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press 2022.