

UN's Environmental Challenge

By STEVE CHARNOVITZ

The United Nations Environment Program is facing growing competition for the mantle of U.N. leadership on ecological issues.

Twenty years ago, UNEP stood alone. But now there are several large institutional players with a major role in environmental protection.

Chief among the new competitors is the World Bank, which spends about \$2.4 billion a year on environmental programs. Another is the United Nations Development Program, which spends about \$700 million a year on ecological projects. By contrast, UNEP's annual budget is \$60 million.

The predictable result is that UNEP is in jeopardy. The Clinton administration recently cut financial backing for UNEP by 29%. The program's future will be discussed when its governing council convenes in Nairobi this May.

The decline in support for UNEP is unfortunate. Despite the growth of other organizations concerned with global environmental protection, there is a role for UNEP. Rather than reduce its role, U.N. members should use UNEP as a nucleus for an expanded U.N. organization concerned exclusively with environmental protection.

There are several reasons why the United Nations needs a sharper focus on the environment. One important function for such an agency would be to prevent environmental disagreements — for example, disputes over labeling products for

their environmental effects, or transferring solid wastes among nations — from spilling over into trade disputes. Business has a clear interest in securing greater multilateral cooperation on such issues.

A new international environment agency also is needed to deal with ecological concerns that are intrinsically global. Protecting the atmosphere and the oceans, and ensuring diversity of species, require multilateral coordination. These problems should not be left to ad hoc management; the time horizons of national politicians often are too short.

In addition to expanding the scope of UNEP, the United Nations should develop new models that go beyond government-only membership. For years, multinational corporations and environmental groups have sought better environmental policies. It is time to bring these groups directly into international decision-making.

Even with an expanded mandate and wider membership, UNEP would face some unique challenges. When it was established in 1972 by the U.N. General Assembly, the environmental unit was given no authority and little funding. UNEP's efforts to introduce sound environmental planning into U.N. programs often have been resisted. Making matters worse, its headquarters was located in Kenya, where crime problems interfered with recruitment of staff.

Nevertheless, over its 23-year life-span, UNEP has succeeded in

making many contributions. For example, it spurred adoption of multilateral treaties protecting the ozone layer, safeguarding hazardous waste movements, tracking climate change and ensuring bio-diversity.

The Rio Conference of 1992 planted the seeds for UNEP's current crisis. Rather than pursuing environmental protection and economic development as separate objectives, participating nations decided to combine both goals and adopt "sustainable development" policies. To underline the point, the Rio Conference reassigned UNEP's coordinating function to a new U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development, located in New York.

The concept of sustainable development, and the gradual greening of other international organizations, raised a question about UNEP's role. Some advocate abolishing it and merging its functions into the United Nations Development Program.

Certainly, good development policies and sound environmental practices are mutually reinforcing. But it would be a mistake to merge the United Nations' environmental and economic development units. The likeliest outcome would be a weakening of environmental efforts.

The main reason is that many environment concerns, such as preservation of species, are peripheral to the economic development agenda. In addition, the notion that economic growth leads to an improved environment rests on a shaky foun-

ation. Even industrial countries often feel too poor to spend money on safeguarding the ecosystem.

There is, however, a good case to be made for reinventing UNEP from the inside. Elizabeth Dowdeswell, a very capable Canadian who serves as UNEP's executive director, is carrying out valuable work along those lines. She is trying to bring coherence to UNEP's disparate functions, which include monitoring the environment, maintaining the Earthwatch database, providing secretariats for environmental treaties and promoting the development of international environmental law. She also is trying to put in place a more flexible, decentralized organizational structure.

This reform effort has slowed down UNEP's operations. The ensuing surplus in unspent funds drew the ire of the U.S. State Department, which cut \$6 million from UNEP's funds and sent most of it to the U.N. Development Program instead.

This year will be a crucial one for UNEP. Folding it into the Development Program may help tidy up the U.N. organization chart. But it would be a mistake to lose international focus on the environment. Instead, U.N. members should address the problems of international environmental disorganization and test new governance methods for the 21st century.

Steve Charnovitz writes often on business, trade and environmental issues.