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The United Nations Environment Programme – Reforms are called for

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Bonn, February 2009. For close to forty years now, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has embodied the international community's environmental conscience. This week the UNEP's Governing Council is set to convene, for the 25th time, at its headquarters in Nairobi, a meeting in which the Global Ministerial Environment Forum, including Sigmar Gabriel, German Federal Minister for the Environment, will participate. It is likely to prove to be a somewhat peculiar anniversary, and in a situation overshadowed by financial crisis and economic recovery packages, it is not expected to produce much in the way of spectacular headlines.

The national ministers will, once again, be discussing institutional reforms of international environmental policy. The main reason why UNEP, a UN specialised agency whose mandate is focused in just this field, has become widely known in Germany is that it was run for eight years by Klaus Töpfer, among other things a former German environment minister. Klaus Töpfer also contributed, at the international level, to revitalising and improving the visibility of UNEP, which was in the midst of an existential crisis when he assumed office in 1998. And Töpfer, much like his successor Achim Steiner – a graduate, incidentally, of the Postgraduate Training Programme for Development Cooperation of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) – found himself faced with a number of fundamental problems that were then and are today not accessible to solution only by means of an internal modernisation of the UNEP Secretariat.

It is, instead, evident that UNEP's powers and resources are sufficient neither to come to effective grips with the huge range of environmental problems facing the world nor to reasonably focus environmentally relevant activities within the extensive UN system. Compared with the United Nation's major specialised agencies, like e.g. the World Health Organisation, UNEP's headquarters, with its roughly 400 staff members, seems more to resemble the proverbial step-child. All the same, though, UNEP is expected to spark the international community to protect the global environment, or at least to use it with care, that is, sustainably. Governments from Berlin to Bamako and from Paris to Beijing expect UNEP to move ahead with expertise-based authority, leading and coordinating the UN's work at the interface between environment and development. And not least, UNEP is expected to support the developing countries in their efforts to implement internationally agreed environmental measures at the national level.

In fact, UNEP has developed into a driver of international environmental policy, again and again successfully mastering the necessary tightrope walk between divergent interests embraced by the industrialised and developing countries. To cite just two examples, UNEP led the way in developing an exemplary policy on protection of the ozone layer as well as in creating the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It furthermore plays a key role in the further development of international environmental law and serves as a custodian of numerous important international environmental agreements, including conventions on biodiversity and on dealing with hazardous wastes and chemicals. UNEP has, though, seemed relatively powerless in the face of a growing institutional fragmentation of international environmental policy and the bickering over responsibilities this has often meant within the UN. But on the contrary: the pioneering role it has played in international climate protection or efforts to combat desertification has led to the establishment of a number of autonomous treaty regimes that are now fall outside its formal scope of responsibility.

Which is not to say that UNEP is running out of issues. Climate policy, with its more dramatic aspects recently tending to drown out the public discussion on environmental issues, has



boosted the need for a watchful and functionally effective international environmental agency. Today, for instance, it seems perfectly normal to the German populace that laws need to be enacted to prevent environmental dangers of the kind that result from the pollution of water, air, and soils. In large parts of the world this is not at all so normal; and here UNEP acts as a catalyst. The “Bali Strategic Plan,” adopted in 2005 and designed to strengthen UNEP’s hand in precisely this function, is for this reason one of the core elements of the ongoing reform debate. It offers the developing countries a yardstick to measure the credibility of the industrialised countries, enabling them, not least, to condition their support for more extensive institutional reform on the implementation of agreements already adopted.

This points unmistakably to the development dimension of global environmental policy. As long as the industrialised countries are unwilling to make any substantial material concessions, there is very little reason to expect any breakthroughs to be made in efforts to fundamentally strengthen UNEP in political terms. The industrialised countries are therefore called upon to present credible offers to the developing countries if they are seriously interested in promoting global environmental protection and efforts to strengthen UN environmental policy in institutional terms.

Moreover, they would also be well advised to steer clear of one of the secondary arenas of the reform debate. Some critics have suggested that a number of central problems of international environmental policy would simply take care of themselves if UNEP’s international staff were only liberated from that Moloch Nairobi and the secretariat relocated in New York or Geneva. This is tantamount to wilfully disregarding the highly charged symbolic power of Nairobi as UNEP headquarters. UNEP was the first, and for a long time the only, UN agency to be headquartered in a developing country. Questioning this arrangement would serve only to strain the already sensitive bonds of trust between industrialised and developing countries, perhaps even proving to be an additional impediment to international environmental policy.

There may be many reasons for scepticism toward any ambitious set of organisational reforms, in particular when the organisation in question is the notoriously cumbersome United Nations. Still, there is no convincing reason not, finally, to place the world organisation in a position to address environmental concerns with a clear and resounding voice on the stage of world politics. What this calls for is a strong environmental agency, one equipped with appropriate financial resources and institutional authority. It is high time to get to work on upgrading UNEP. The environment ministers meeting in Nairobi would be well advised to take the opportunity of this anniversary event to present the UN General Assembly with a set of unequivocal recommendations bearing on this matter.



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