

A Call for Action

The creation of an effective and relevant GEO is, at best, a long shot and long-term prospect. There is a need to establish an international environmental institution with a strong mandate and dispute settlement mechanism, but it is an opium dream to think that such an institution could be created in the current or foreseeable political climate. UNCED provided an agenda for promoting sustainable development, but it did not establish an effective institutional structure to manage the agenda. The 1992 UNCED and the outcome of the UN Summit on Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995 are fairly strong indicators that the commitment to the new paradigm proposed here is weak.

Until national decision-makers collectively realize that the traditional sovereignty of nation states and current mechanisms for ordering relations amongst nation states are inadequate for addressing the types of global issues now emerging, the prospects for a GEO remain poor. The GEO is not yet an idea whose time has come. Yet, the real world preconditions that underlie international institution-building clearly exist in this case in the form of increasing environmental stress on a number of fronts. The GEO is an idea that should be pursued.

One opportunity for drawing international attention to institutional issues will be the UN General Assembly's 1997 review of Agenda 21. This meeting could at least encourage serious consideration of the concept of a GEO, stimulating stakeholder and country support. A GEO would not be a definitive solution to mankind's planetary environmental predicament, but it would be a necessary step toward facilitating greater international cooperation and reform.

Nonetheless, for the foreseeable future the basic structure of the UN system is not about to change. Recognizing this, institutional reform options to promote international environmental management (and in the longer term to support the idea of a GEO) are constrained. In practical terms, any reform or change would need to be modest and thus require only marginal increases in the political will to address environmental issues through an international mechanism. A primary option for pursuing more effective international environmental management, but not necessarily requiring major institutional reform or increases in funding, is to strengthen UNEP, including its activities with other UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

UNEP is not an institution per se, but a programme designed to catalyse, coordinate and stimulate activities related to the environment. This role is primarily pursued within the UN system, but UNEP also works and seeks cooperation with non