

The Challenges of Change

A Conversation with Elizabeth Dowdeswell Executive Director, United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)

Global Agenda: *You have been executive director for seven months now, arriving at a time of considerable transition following UNCED. What is UNEP's key role in this post-UNCED period?*

Elizabeth Dowdeswell: This post-UNCED period is a very exciting time. A number of important things happened at UNCED that are going to change not only what we do but how we do it. That, in turn, will be influenced by the entire reform of the UN system. This provides all kinds of scope and opportunity for reevaluating our role and looking ahead over the next decade. We have checked our activities against Agenda 21 and UNCED. It became clear to us that there are emerging areas that require a much strengthened initiative and other areas that require a restructuring or refocussing. The recent Governing Council took very seriously the job of looking at priorities, with three surfacing.

The first was capacity building. I would stress that this does not just mean training and education. It involves a much more systemic look at how to support the development of sound environmental and sustainable developmental practices, in developing countries in particular. That means looking at everything from environmental law and institutions, to governance, to policy making, to the mobilization of financial resources, training, education, information networks and so forth. For UNEP, that means much of what we do should be judged by how it contributes to capacity building. Some of what we've done in the past will remain, but we will reorient some programs so that they become management tools.

Secondly, the priority will be the mobilization of governments and others to really solve environmental problems. UNEP has always had a catalytic role. One of our strengths is in bringing governments to the table, be it around formal negotiations for an international treaty or for the design of a regional program. One of the requests we're getting from places where there are

"I focus on the development of management tools because... countries are simply crying out for assistance in very practical ways to help them understand what it means to implement sustainable development. Everybody has the rhetoric down pat, but people are genuinely looking for how on Earth you do it."

cross-border conflicts over, for example, water, is to come in and help countries design a long-term plan for co-operation. We will always have an interest in the management of natural resources, so that we can be a critical element in bringing governments together to solve particular problems. I hope we can push forward the edges of environmental law into such areas as innovative conflict resolution.

The third priority is what I call sensing the environment. The world expects that it can come to UNEP at any point in time and find out what the state of the environment is. We need to continue to do that, whether we do it ourselves or ensure that we have

the networks to do it. Our Earthwatch program came under close scrutiny, primarily because some countries viewed it as data collection for the sake of collecting data. We need to ask ourselves whether we are looking at Earthwatch as a management tool.

GA: *The co-ordination of effort between U.N.-related bodies has always been a challenge. You have called for a "team approach" to implementing sustainable development. How will UNEP contribute?*

ED: I think that is already in evidence. A local example is the synergy between Habitat and UNEP. One of the first clusters of Agenda 21 issues being examined by the CSD is that of human settlements, health and waste management. What is happening here in Nairobi is that people in both Habitat and UNEP are discovering all kinds of duplication and, more importantly, where there is opportunity for co-operation. That is just one example of how the concept of sustainable development means that no one agency can possibly implement it. It's a bringing together of disciplines that have not traditionally worked together, whether it be the social and natural sciences or the environment and the economy. That means you have to search out new partnerships. Most of what we are doing is now in partnership. Very little is done on our own, whether it's bringing the FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] into biodiversity, working with UNCTAD [UN Conference on Trade and Development] and GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] on trade-related matters, or with UNIFEM [United Nations

Development Fund for Women] on the critical issue of women and development. We have partnerships with almost every UN agency. What I'm trying to do is ensure that we form those partnerships at the beginning when the strategic thinking is being done, rather than after something has already been designed.

GA: *The Commission on Sustainable Development recently held its inaugural session. What do you see as the chief results?*

ED: Let me say first that I am a strong supporter of the concept of the CSD because I think that a high-level political forum to provide incentive to governments and organizations to maintain a focus and a priority on the follow-up to Agenda 21 is particularly important. I don't see the CSD as competing with UNEP. One is operational and the other is not. The CSD, through its very focussed political discussions, should be in a position to give impetus to all parts of the system and, in fact, member governments.

I was delighted by a number of things that happened at CSD. First, there was enough political commitment shown to indicate that governments wanted CSD to work. Second, governments displayed a willingness to try out different ways of working. For example, they readily accepted the invitations of several countries to work in collaboration with them and other parts of the UN system to tackle key issues. That has not been the traditional way of working.

GA: *You seem to have a solid faith in the UN's ability to facilitate global environmental, economic and social changes. On what do you base this?*

ED: I'm an eternal optimist for one thing, but, more importantly, I

have always believed that multilateralism is one of the best tools that we have to solve our global problems. The UN provides one of our very best hopes. It is not without difficulty, as we see so much of the resources of the UN being focussed on peacemaking and peacekeeping. The whole development side of the agenda, the social and economic side, requires a great deal of attention.

"I do believe that we have been able to achieve a lot through this multilateral forum, and I don't see anything better on the horizon. I see a real opportunity for organizations like UNEP and Habitat to become what I call instruments of peace."

That is something I believe in passionately. The work UNEP does in precautionary thinking and sensing issues before they become points of conflict is important. I think the work that Habitat does in resettlement can pave the way to a much better and well articulated continuum of activity from disaster relief to rehabilitation and, ultimately, development.

GA: *It is said that solutions to global environmental problems begin locally. Why then are we assigning a greater role to international institutions?*

ED: We are discovering with the class of problems we have uncovered that they are global problems. You can make an impact locally, and you must make an impact locally, but ultimately you need the whole world to find a sound solution. We are becoming less and less isolationist as countries. The issues of international trade, for

example, become critical to the resolution of some of our domestic sustainability issues. Just look at Canada's difficulties over fishing. Very often what you need to shake the system domestically is a good deal of international peer pressure. I never underestimate the power of peer pressure in really mobilizing solutions.

GA: *Where can Canada best contribute to the sustainable development efforts of UNEP and other UN agencies?*

ED: Canada has a very proud record with respect to its role within UN institutions, and it simply must continue. It must because it has achieved a credibility that allows it to mobilize action, among large and small governments, among developed and developing countries, that very few other countries can do. Because of its track record, its participatory approach and inclusiveness, it is credible to many countries. That places a significant obligation on its shoulders to play its part to mobilize solutions. Canada continues to show that other approaches can work. Sometimes it's that pilot project, that case study, that living example, that says so much more than reams of paper.

"The work that Canada has done with non-governmental groups, the fact that Canada had in its UNCED delegation representation from provincial governments, business groups, women, youth and natives, the fact that it includes all of those resources in its work speaks volumes internationally."

