

## Unfinished Business: Toward a Global Environmental Organization

*"The world is not now and may never be ready for world government, but it cannot resolve mankind's planetary predicament through the existing order of sovereign national states. Have we then a problem without a solution?" Lynton Keith Caldwell<sup>1</sup>*

This paper is a response to the above statement and the question that follows it. The purpose of this Commentary is to raise the idea of a Global Environmental Organization (GEO) and to set out some key issues that arise in considering the establishment of such an organization. The establishment of a GEO, a multilateral institution for managing global environmental relations, poses many challenges. Assuming the political will could be garnered to establish a GEO, likely an unrealistic assumption in the current international political climate, these deeper challenges stem from the inherently all-inclusive nature of environmental concerns. The institutional challenge is to develop a structure that focuses on environmental issues, but simultaneously effectively addresses environmental links with other issues, such as economic development, financial assistance and trade. Therefore, implicit to the idea of establishing a GEO is the acknowledgement that some changes may be needed in existing institutions that directly or indirectly participate in activities that influence the environment, such as sustainable development aspects of international financial institutions. This linkage aspect, with ample room for bureaucratic "turf wars", will undoubtedly make it even more difficult to generate the political will to establish a new organization.

### The Environmental Agenda and the Existing System

The international environmental agenda and the current institutional mechanisms for addressing it are diffuse and inherently complex. Environmental issues may be categorized into three types; global commons, transboundary or regional, and local. Environmental degradation of the global commons refers to environmental damage that has global effects. Regional environmental issues, while international in scope, are not global. These would include sulphur dioxide emissions ("acid rain") effects on neighbouring states. Local environmental degradation includes

---

<sup>1</sup>Lynton Keith Caldwell, Between Two Worlds: Science, the Environmental Movement, and Policy Choice, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 152.