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11-1-2011

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Recommended Citation
Young, O. (2011). "Overcoming Fragmented Governance: The case of climate change and the MDGs." Governance and Sustainability Issue Brief Series: Brief 2. Center for Governance and Sustainability. University of Massachusetts Boston.

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GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY ISSUE BRIEF SERIES
NOVEMBER 2011

Overcoming Fragmented Governance: The Case of Climate Change and the MDGs

by Oran R. Young

Fragmented governance hampers efforts to address tightly coupled challenges, like coming to grips with climate change and fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals. The way forward is to launch programmatic initiatives focusing on adaptation to climate change and the transition to a green economy that appeal to many separate bodies as win–win opportunities.

Fragmented Governance

International governance systems are commonly compartmentalized or segmented along sectoral lines. Distinct regimes deal with matters of peace and security, economic development, human rights, and environmental protection, assuming that the extent of interaction among these different types of issues is not so great that a sectoral approach is inadvisable. Sometimes this assumption makes sense; there is no need to pay a lot of attention to the environmental implications of many traditional concerns in the realm of human rights. But often - especially under the conditions prevailing in today's globalized world – sectoral segmentation leads to costly fragmentation. Problems of peace and security involving civil strife have far-reaching consequences for human rights. Human rights issues touch on environmental matters, as in the case of the idea that all people have or should have a right to freshwater. Environmental disputes (e.g. the tuna-dolphin and shrimp-turtle controversies) are tightly connected to economic arrangements, such as those embedded in the international trade regime. In some cases (e.g. the disagreement over trade in genetically-modified organisms), the problem turns decisively on a first-order decision about whether the issue itself should be framed as an economic matter or as an environmental matter. And this is merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to problems of fragmentation arising from the segmentation of governance systems along sectoral lines.

The way forward in addressing the climate change/MDG nexus is to focus on substantive initiatives rather than on organizational reform and to launch programs that can attract the participation of many separate entities.

There is a natural tendency to turn first to organizational reform in efforts to overcome problems of fragmented governance. But more often than not, such measures prove ineffective. They create bureaucratic nightmares, while failing to eliminate entrenched pockets of political influence in existing structures. What is needed instead is the initiation of substantive activities that provide win-win opportunities in the sense that existing organizations can benefit from active engagement, without running a risk of losing their identities in ill-conceived organizational reforms.

Nowhere are these concerns about fragmented governance more apparent than in efforts to tackle large-scale environmental issues (e.g. coping with global climate change or GCC) and to address fundamental concerns about human well-being (e.g. fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs).[1] This policy brief describes the interactions between climate change and the central concerns of the MDGs (see Figure 1), explains the disconnect in current efforts to address these issues, discusses steps that could be taken to alleviate obstacles to overcoming the GCC/MDG Nexus, and concludes with some recommendations for governments convening at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20.

The Climate Change/MDG Nexus

That the onset of climate change presents a cocktail of biophysical impacts that constitute profound challenges to the fulfillment of the MDGs is increasingly evident. Several features of climate change stand out in this connection:

- Sea level rise is already threatening the existence of many small-island developing states (SIDs); it is destined to have major impacts on food production and urban infrastructure in low-lying countries like Bangladesh and Indonesia.

Brief 2

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- A global average increase of surface temperatures of 2^{0}C is likely to translate into 3^{0}C in sub-Saharan Africa, a change that would trigger developments that could cause the death of tens of millions of people.
- The melting of the glaciers of the Himalayan Plateau is likely to disrupt the annual flow of major rivers in East and South Asia, thereby producing negative effects on food production that will challenge the food security of several billion people.[2]
- Ocean acidification, one of the more rampant effects of climate change, is expected to cause severe damage to coral reefs and fish stocks in the low-latitudes that are an important source of protein for people located in many developing countries.
- Although the evidence is not yet decisive, there are good reasons to believe that climate change will intensify extreme weather events (e.g. hurricanes, tsunamis) that are capable of wrecking havoc on the security of coastal populations.

Conversely, many activities intended to fulfill the MDGs will affect the course of climate change or intensify the impacts of climate change on human well-being:

- Worldwide, deforestation and logging account for some 16 percent of greenhouse gas emissions; land use and biomass burning add another 10 percent.
- Urbanization - often associated with efforts to escape poverty - produces heat islands by reducing the amount of solar radiation reflected back into space.
- The destruction of mangrove forests to facilitate activities like shrimp farming increases the vulnerability of low-lying areas to storm surges intensified by climate change.
- Increases in the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in order to make up for declining agricultural productivity attributable to climate-induced desertification and coastal erosion produce dead zones in the ocean that reduce the productivity of marine systems.

There is an indisputable need to integrate efforts to cope with the problem of global climate change and the campaign to make progress toward fulfilling the MDGs. For the most part, however, this has not happened. Efforts to address climate change center on the annual meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and associated activities like the scientific assessments of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). While there is no equally focused counterpart in the case of the MDGs, efforts to address this set of issues proceed through the work of organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). There are no formal barriers to initiatives on the part of FAO, WHO, and others designed to influence the work of the UNFCCC and vice versa. But these links are weak and relatively ineffectual. Why is this the case?

Figure 1: Millennium Development Goals

Sources of Fragmentation

The source of fragmentation of governance arrangements for global climate change and progress toward achieving the MDGs lies in the distinct histories of the two issues. In addition, the natural tendency of responsible agencies is to develop their own agendas and organizational cultures that largely ignore issues of coordination with others and that prove resistant to coordination efforts mandated by outside forces.

The IPCC, established in 1988 on the initiative of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), has developed an independent existence featuring its own leadership, its own administrative apparatus, and a worldwide scientific network closely associated with the global change research programs. Although the UNFCCC was opened for signature at the UN Conference on Environment and Development, the Rio Earth Summit, in 1992, an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee had worked out its content in advance. The entry into force of the UNFCCC in 1994 led to the establishment of a secretariat as a distinct international body. Subsequent efforts to strengthen the climate regime, including the negotiation of the Kyoto Protocol signed at COP3 in 1997 and the abortive effort to strengthen or replace the pro-

tocol at COP15 in 2009, have taken place under the auspices of the COP and through the activities of working groups created by the COP for this purpose.

The campaign to fulfill the MDGs started a decade later with the adoption of the Millennium Declaration by the UN General Assembly in September 2000, a document that announces the eight MDGs as UN priorities, sets forth a series of targets to be met by 2015, and authorizes various UN agencies to take the lead in meeting these targets. A raft of UN agencies, programmes, and related bodies have gotten into the act in the effort to pursue these goals; the 2010 report on progress in this realm lists 27 separate bodies as participants in this effort, including FAO, WHO, UNESCO, UNDP, and a host of less prominent players. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) tracks overall progress regarding the fulfillment of the MDGs; it has created a sizable collection of MDG indicators and collates reports on progress on an annual basis. But DESA does not exercise authority over the activities of most of the participants in this effort. The UN has a body – the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination – created for the purpose of combating the natural tendency toward fragmentation in situations of this sort. But the capacity of this body to solve problems of fragmented governance is limited, especially in cases like fulfilling the MDGs, where the effort is so wide-ranging and touches on the concerns of such a large number of separate bodies.

The Road to Synergy

Given this background, what can and should be done to tackle the GCC/MDG Nexus in the interests of overcoming fragmentation and promoting synergy in efforts to deal with these profoundly interconnected issue domains? Some see UNEP as an important player in addressing this matter. Such a scenario is especially appealing to those who advocate upgrading UNEP into a UN Environment Organization or even recasting it as a World Environment Organization on the model of the WTO. But this is not a promising option in dealing with the GCC/MDG Nexus. UNEP has no jurisdiction over the UNFCCC or its secretariat. Nor is this model likely to find favor with key players in the effort to fulfill the MDGs. It is hard to imagine an effective UNEP/UNDP alliance in this context. More powerful organizations like FAO and WHO will simply go their own way in designing and implementing their programs, regardless of the desires or interests of UNEP.

The UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) is no better situated to tackle this challenge. Although the CSD has a broad mandate, it lacks both the authority and the resources needed to overcome fragmentation. The commission is largely a talk shop, saddled with a mission – promoting progress toward sustainable development – that has proven both murky and contentious at the operational level, whatever its attractions in conceptual or visionary terms. It does not make programmatic decisions. It is hard to see any way to alleviate these limitations that is politically realistic.

The way forward in addressing the GCC/MDG Nexus is to focus on substantive initiatives rather than on organizational reform and to launch programs that can attract the participation of many separate entities. Two central themes stand out in this realm: (1) taking steps to promote adaptation to the impacts of climate change, especially in developing countries and (2) finding ways to move the idea of a green economy from the status of an appealing concept to the stage of implementation on the ground. Without adaptation, the onset of climate change will undermine efforts to fulfill the MDGs in many parts of the world, including those regions (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa) where the challenges are greatest. In the absence of progress toward a green economy, the pace and severity of the onset of climate change will not only stymie efforts to fulfill the MDGs but also erode the quality of life of those living in advanced industrial societies.

Implications for Rio+20

Rio+20 offers an opportunity to make progress in both areas. The way forward regarding adaptation is for the UNFCCC Annex 1 countries to make good on the promises articulated in the Copenhagen Accord negotiated at the close of COP15 in 2009. Embracing the economic restructuring needed to promote a green economy will require a more complex strategy, combining domestic initiatives on the part of members of the G-20 with international measures on the part of the WTO to make suitable adjustments in the provisions of the trade regime, UNDP to foster environmentally friendly development strategies, and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to spearhead an effort to mobilize the funding needed to encourage a shift toward environmentally friendly growth strategies. As with the pursuit of the MDGs themselves, there is no need to create a super agency to tackle this challenge. The road to success will involve engaging the efforts of numerous agencies that see a coordinated effort to address the GCC/MDG Nexus as a win-win proposition.

No one should have any illusions about the feasibility of adopting and implementing this strategy. The problem of fragmented governance resulting from longstanding and entrenched practices involving the treatment of issues in a sectorally segmented manner is severe at all levels of social organization. But casting the spotlight of world attention on the substantive aspects of the GCC/MDG Nexus and developing focused programmatic initiatives to address them, constitutes a worthy goal for the Rio+20 conference where governments from around the world will gather to negotiate pathways to a green economy and new institutional framework for sustainable development.

Acknowledgement

I thank two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this brief.

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Endnotes

[1] For a discussion of these issues framed in Earth System terms, see Young and Steffen 2009.

[2] While there has been some controversy about this phenomenon in the media, the weight of the scientific evidence indicates that the threat is real and important – Powell 2011, Ch. 14.

Citation information

Please use the following citation for this brief:
Young, O. (2011). "Overcoming Fragmented Governance: The case of climate change and the MDGs." *Governance and Sustainability Issue Brief Series*: Brief 2. Center for Governance and Sustainability. University of Massachusetts Boston.

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Governance and Sustainability Issue Brief Series
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