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Time for an Upgrade

The Rio+20 summit was nothing short of an epic failure. In the face of accelerating climate change and an ever-increasing use of resources, governments failed to deliver the transformational change needed to safeguard our planet's future. There was no commitment to an energy revolution based on renewables and energy efficiency, or to urgently end deforestation. Overall, the world got just words and greenwash, not the urgent action required to provide prosperity for all without exceeding our planet's limits.

By contrast, the strengthening of UNEP has been held up as one of the summit's top achievements.

It is indeed good news that the General Assembly finally agreed in December 2012 that UNEP will receive "secure, stable and increased financial resources from the regular budget of the UN". It was about time to end a state of affairs where UNEP needed to pass around a 'begging bowl' each year to secure vital funds for environmental protection. And it was also excellent news that both Brazil and China used the occasion of Rio+20 to pledge significant additional sums to strengthen UNEP. This was a recognition of the important role UNEP plays in emerging economies – and a long way from the old, and false,

"environment vs. development" dichotomy that overshadowed its founding 40 years ago.

UNEP rightly aims to deliver "the environment for development", and has worked very hard since its creation to address and become relevant to the needs of developing countries. Strengthening it therefore contributes to global development efforts, rather than distracting from them: the environment is, after all, the essential base for all development. No doubt, this is one reason why African Heads of States and Governments want to see it turned into a fully fledged specialized agency.

Rio+20 should indeed have been the place where UNEP finally became a proper UN Environment Agency, as many, including the African and European Unions, demanded in the final plenary discussion session. Sustainable development governance needs a global authority for the environment, with greatly enhanced implementation, compliance and enforcement mechanisms. Yet governments failed to upgrade UNEP at the summit, another reason for saying its outcome was a failure. UNEP did at least progress on the pitiful status quo, but this progression was ruefully inadequate for a Heads of States summit.

Governments must now move urgently to complete the upgrading process started in Rio. They must put flesh on the bones of the General Assembly resolution and secure significant additional funds for UNEP's urgent and important work. They must also not shy away from more controversial subjects, such as giving UNEP the tools needed to effectively monitor implementation of multilateral environmental agreements – and to impose sanctions on those breaking the rules. As long as UNEP can only plead, coach and capacity build, while the World Trade Organization can impose punitive tariff measures on those breaking their rules, there is an unacceptable inequality of power. Environmental governance, people and the environment will continue to lose out as a result.

Yet if sustainability is to thrive, we will need much more than a strengthening and upgrading of existing institutions. As well as a UN Environment Agency with real powers, we need global rules that change power dynamics and investment incentives. Global rules on corporate accountability and liability, for example, are essential to ensure that damaging people

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and the environment is no longer a free for all, but has real costs. At the Johannesburg Earth Summit in 2002, governments acknowledged the need for global rules for global corporations. At Rio+20, however, they only called for slight – and voluntary – improvements in the way that corporations report their social and environmental impacts. A binding global instrument that ensures full liability for any social or environmental damage global corporations cause must therefore remain high on any governance reform list. Indeed, it will be a fundamental test of whether

governments want to set rules for people and the planet or abandon responsibility to a free market focussed on short-term gain.

In truth, sustainable development cannot become reality in a world in which short-term bets by financial markets are all-powerful. Strong controls of such markets are therefore an integral part of the needed reform of global governance. New fiscal instruments, such as a Financial Transaction Tax, need to be adopted to slow harmful speculation and deliver much needed finance for development and environmental protection. A complete social and environmental review of the global trade system is also long overdue.

There has been talk about strengthening UNEP for decades. Remarkably, over the last 40 years, UNEP has thrived in difficult circumstances. It's present ability to publish global environmental assessments, for example, is remarkable: even 20 years ago NGOs needed to invest a lot of resources to find and publicize the kind of information that UNEP's Global Environment Outlook, for example, now summarizes so succinctly. We are grateful to UNEP for playing this role, thus allowing us to focus even more on frontline campaigning. But, we also know that time is running out – and that every new Outlook report only underscores the increasing urgency for action.

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