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The approaches to achieving sustainability are sometimes presented as being in competition with each other, but we must come to the realization that moving towards the goal of achieving sustainable development requires that all three pillars are mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing—without one being developed at the expense of the other.

Yet we know from the Secretary-General's report that the three pillars are not equal and that the weakest pillar is the environmental pillar. There has been consistent agreement over the last two decades, whether this has come from the Nairobi Declaration, the Millennium Assembly or the recent Nusa Dua Declaration that international environmental governance (IEG) is fragmented and overly complex and therefore weak compared to the economic and social pillars.

The impacts of the system are most widely felt by developing countries which depend directly on the environment for their livelihoods and their means of living. These countries with the most at stake in terms of environmental sustainability are the very countries that have become disenfranchised within the system because the costs of participating have become so overwhelming.

Our ability to take coordinated, transformational action on pressing environmental issues is hampered by the fact that no one organization has the political authority to serve as the 'centre of gravity' for the international environmental regime for sustained political influence in other global fora (e.g. the trade and development regimes). If we are serious about protecting our life support systems and achieving sustainability, we need an authoritative environmental voice, an anchor that can promote the interlinkages between Multilateral Environmental Agreements, set and review the environmental agenda across the United Nations system and a voice which aligns global environmental policy with global environmental financing.

We also have to ensure that the decisions that we take at the global level relate to the national level where the impact is felt. If we design a system that does not consider the real issues that are faced by people on the ground and decision makers who have limited resources and have to prioritize actions, no progress will be made.

There has been a lot of talk about reforming our international institutions; we have agreed that the status quo is not acceptable. We also have agreement on many of the problems, but finding and agreeing on the solution has thus far eluded the international community. However, a successfully governed system for sustainable development cannot be achieved until we can solve this at the international and at the national level.

The UNEP Governing Council launched a process last year with Ministers of Environment to look at what the prerequisites are of a well-functioning IEG system. They agreed on the basic objectives and functions of what such a system might be. In February they agreed to take this process a step further and discuss broader reforms that are required to be able to meet these objectives and functions and present these to the General Assembly and Rio+20 Second Preparatory Committee. This process will provide the Preparatory Committee with some concrete options of how to improve the IEG system within the context of governance for sustainable development and in doing so contribute to a more effective sustainable development system. But in order to obtain meaningful outcomes, we must move beyond discussion and take action. We have to be bold and have the courage of our convictions to embrace the need for change required to meet the complex needs of sustainable development governance. Rio+20 is an opportunity to rethink, reorder and restructure governance of the environmental pillar as part of a broader effort to enhance the governance of sustainable development.
