

Scientific Advisory Processes on Environment and Sustainable Development

by Jan-Stefan Fritz*

The Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 marks a further step in recent efforts to build a more coherent global framework for sustainable development and environmental protection. Amongst the many topics on the agenda of the Summit, the role of science for sustainable development and information for decision-making will also appear. Calls will be heard from politicians for more research, more action, better advice, more transparency and, once again, there will be discussion of a gap between decision-makers and scientists.

With a view to discussions about scientific advisory processes in advance of the Johannesburg Summit, the LJN System-Wide Earthwatch Coordination office recently published its second *Report on International Scientific Advisory Processes on the Environment and Sustainable Development*. The Report provides a brief overview of what advisory processes currently exist and how they work. It then analyses recent trends in providing scientific knowledge for policymaking and assesses gaps between advisory and policymaking processes. It con-

cludes by offering several recommendations on improving how scientific information is compiled, debated, shared and eventually reflected in political outcomes.

Overall the Report identifies more than 50 different scientific advisory processes in three general categories: science for multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), science of particular policy relevance, and science for assessing the general state of the environment. Although there is surprisingly little competition or overlap between the large number of processes, there is also little overarching debate about their roles and organisation. Most discussions about science for policymaking either focus on a single issue, usually climate change, or possible means of bridging the data gap between the availability of quality data from around the world and the needs of policymakers. In addition to the data gap, which was originally identified in Chapter 40 of Agenda 21, the Report identifies several other gaps as well, including:

- **A linkages gap** amongst the increasing number of advisory processes being set up;
- **A public access gap** between the production and the synthesis of knowledge and the use of this knowledge by a broader readership; ➤

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- **A systematic organisation-of-information gap** that makes it difficult for users to find information quickly about different environmental issues from different perspectives; and
- **An impact gap** between the work of scientific advisory processes and efforts to support local- and national-level capacity building.

With these gaps in mind, the Report offers recommendations that could be easily realized within the existing international environmental governance structure while at the same time providing this structure with a more coherent framework.

Concerning the compilation, management and dissemination of policy-relevant scientific knowledge the Report recommends:

- establishing a *Stakeholder Charter on Minimum Standards of Information Provided by UN Sources on Environment and Sustainable Development* in order to improve the transparency of information provided by UN agencies; and
- improving accessibility to the myriad documents and reports produced by the UN by establishing a *UN System-Wide Website Locator for Environment and Sustainable Development Information*.

Concerning the synergies amongst different advisory processes, the Report recommends:

- de-emphasising administrative solutions and instead encouraging substantive collaboration amongst scien-

tific advisory processes that is needs-driven, ends-oriented, and based on the self-interest of all participants; and

- given the number and quality of existing international scientific bodies, creating new advisory processes only when no other appropriate body exists.

Concerning the linkages between advisory processes and other scientific activities the Report recommends:

- assisting the scientific subsidiary bodies of MEAs by asking international organisations to invest in supporting effective National Focal Points and enabling the responsible national bodies to fulfil their report-writing requirements. If implemented, this recommendation has the dual benefit of building domestic capacity and supporting the implementation of conventions.

The importance of devoting more detailed attention to advisory processes is greater than ever. Not only has the international community of States recently begun deliberations on forests and decided to look into establishing a new oceans advisory process (see pages 207 and 211), but it is also considering the future of the UN system itself. This Report offers a perspective on some of the central concerns relating to the provision of scientific advice for environment and development which will be of importance at the Johannesburg Summit.

The Report in its entirety, including the complete set of recommendations, can be downloaded at www.unep.ch/earthw/sciadv2.htm. Print copies can be ordered from UNEP/DEWA, PO Box 30552, Gigiri, Nairobi, Kenya.

