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IMPLEMENTING THE THREE RIO CONVENTION: THE IMPERATIVES OF SYNERGIES AT REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

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Introduction

1. The historic Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, was convened to consider the burgeoning global environmental problems and their increasing threats to sustainable socio-economic development. The world's tropical forests and their huge biological resources were disappearing faster than imagined, the drylands increasingly inhospitable, and climates show significant disparities from established patterns.



Unsustainable logging in the African forests.



Gullies eating away the road in East Africa



Gullies in SE Nigeria due to unsustainable land use

2. The phenomena were global but their impacts much more penetrating in African countries where poverty has remained endemic, than in other parts of the world. Most households in Africa still depend completely on natural resources particularly of soil, vegetation and water for their livelihoods. The growing environmental problems are manifesting in the degradation of these resources and creating severe threats to the wellbeing of millions of poor people across Africa.
3. In order to provide a broad-based global response to the threats, three United Nations conventions were ratified by more than 100 hundred countries including 50 from Africa during the Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992. The conventions are (i) the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD), (ii) United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and (iii) the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). These treaties were underlined by the urge to bring about *sustainable development* in every country of the world following the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) of 1987. The report emphasized the need for nations to pursue socio-economic development in a manner that guarantees prospects for future generations to develop.

Box 1: The Three Rio Conventions

- *The UNCBD seeks to conserve biological diversity; sustain the use of biological resources; and ensure fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from commercial and other use of genetic resources. It entered into force on 29 December 1993.*
- *UNCCD targets combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought in affected countries through international co-operations and partnerships. It entered into force in December 1996.*
- *The UNFCCC seeks to stabilize the concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere at a level that would protect the climate system, within a time-frame long enough to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner. It entered into force in March 1994.*

4. After nearly twenty years that these conventions had been in force with all their potentials for economic development and environmental protection, their impacts remain very limited and environmental degradation is reaching new heights every day. The fact is that efforts at their implementation particularly at the national and local levels are failing.

Box 2: Why efforts are failing

- The three conventions have been interpreted and implemented as if the issues they address are discrete and unrelated; really most communities are faced by more than one of the issues of concern in the conventions. The communities threatened by desertification also suffer from the impacts of climate change and are challenged by disappearing biological resources on which their livelihood completely depends.
- Most countries see the conventions as ‘imposed’ “stand-alone” agreements of limited or no bearing to national priorities. Their implementations are poorly coordinated with Focal points Agencies scattered in Ministries and Departments. There is little effort if any, to benchmark progress. Moreover, and very few countries have attempted to consciously uptake the treaties in their national development plans.
- *The overarching factor is that Synergy is lacking in the implementation of the conventions at all levels.*

5. For the conventions to achieve their lofty goals which are imperatives today, synergies must be facilitated and sustained in their implementation at all levels. Governments must appreciate the fact that environmental problems have decisive implications for socio-economic development and mitigative actions must be well coordinated. This means most if not all sectors of governance have to be involved as environmental issues are intricately connected. Synergies among the conventions would reduce conflicts, improve cost effectiveness and facilitate greater achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), as well as the objectives of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD).

Key actions required

Robust institutional arrangement is critical to achieving synergies among the conventions especially at the national and local levels. In getting this done, Policy Makers would need to consider the following:

- i. Designating a functional coordinating unit/Department. This will provide leadership in the implementation of the conventions as well as serve as a platform for integrating the conventions and other MEAs. The coordinating Department/Unit should serve more than being a mere clearing house; it would also provide direction for actions.
- ii. Ensuring that the coordinating unit is in a strategic Ministry or even in the Presidency. This is to enable the implementation of the conventions to attract the quality attention it so deserve especially in fostering synergies. This will help countries to fulfil their obligations under the conventions. It could also facilitate the need for governments’ policies to be influenced by the treaties.

- iii. Ensuring that critical information flow unhindered from the coordinating agency to the policy makers, and other stakeholders. The information channel should allow for a feedback to ensure that the messages are getting through.
- iv. Establishing an effective Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) component for the implementation of the MEAs. This is would ensure that the various activities are carried out as expected. The M&E report should be published from time to time to generate feedbacks on the activities.
- v. Establishing an environmental desk in each ministry as a vehicle for mainstreaming the conventions into government's development efforts. This is already being done in some countries particularly for UNFCCC. The desk officers must be equipped with appropriate skills and resources for their assignments.

To fully operationalize effective coordination, the following should be considered:

- i. Engaging qualified persons in terms of training and experience as focal points for each of the Conventions. Good training in Ecology, Environmental Sciences, Climatology, Geography and related disciplines are crucial to fully understanding the implications and commitments of each Convention.
- ii. Locating existing programmes or projects that can serve as entry points for facilitating synergy in thematic areas
- iii. Reviewing the Terms of Reference (TOR) for persons who would serve or are already serving as focal points to include capability to network. This will help to remove or minimize duplication of efforts.
- iv. Put in place a visible succession plan in the Ministry/Department to ensure sustainability of effort under the conventions. This implies that qualified individuals should be appointed to various cadres in the coordinating Ministry/Department;
- v. Developing an elaborate plan for capacity building including internal regular seminars, inter-agency meetings, short-term courses, and advanced degrees in environmental management and development studies for the staff members particularly those at the lower cadres;
- vi. Conducting National self-capacity assessment. Some African countries have undertaken this crucial exercise. Others need to do this to determine what is lacking in terms of capacity to enable each country fulfil its obligations under the Agreements;
- vii. Make awareness creation a key activity to target all categories of stakeholders from government officials to NGOs.

Funding is a major issue in the domestication of these conventions. In this respect the following are necessary:

- i. Integrate MEAs concerns into fund sourcing and budgeting. Ensure that there are specific budget lines targeted at MEAs such as for National Communications/ National Reports, Action Plans and restoration of desert lands.
- ii. Invest in developing local capacity to access international funds. Environmental financing is still poorly understood and requires that countries make effort to develop skills for the purpose.
- iii. Employ political strategies to ensure targeted and purposeful utilization of ecological/environmental funds.
- iv. Develop special Trust funds for environmental response activities.

Main Policy issues

The following policy-related measures are needed as strategies for addressing the challenges of effective implementation:

- i. Reviewing national implementation of each of the three conventions and other related MEAs. This should involve a stock taking of what has been done so far and what else needs to be done. It should also include an assessment of the state of the environment in relation to progress in socio-economic development.
- ii. Revising Environmental Action Plan in order to align them with the current challenges in the different countries. National Action Plans are very useful tools for identifying the depth of environmental problems and proffering appropriate actions to address them in line with good practices. They should therefore be adequate in structure and strategy of action.
- iii. Putting in place a functional structure for the coordination of the conventions. An effective coordination arrangement would facilitate proper domestication of the Rio Conventions and other MEAs. It will also help in developing synergies in the implementation of the agreements.
- iv. Putting in place inter-sectoral, inter-ministerial, and inter-agency arrangements to enable all sectors of government recognize and play their own role in the environment-driven development process. In this way, each sector will be able to make its expertise and capabilities available for development purposes.
- v. It is important that governments make a full consideration of environmental implications a basis for embarking on any development process. In this way, they will be able to integrate sustainability issues into development.