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EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE INSTITUTION

Leadership in times of change is about deeply understanding the contextual reality, clearly setting out the destination that needs to be reached, and then fertilizing the ground of possibilities that help steer toward the desired destination.
—Christiana Figueres, UNFCCC Executive Secretary (2010–2016)¹

Leadership is the ability to create a compelling vision, translate it into action, and sustain it.² Leadership shapes the vision, management, and culture of an organization, its sense of identity and purpose.³ Although leaders of international organizations possess much weaker formal powers than the heads of multinational corporations or even public administrations at the national level, they hold meaningful agenda-setting power, shape debates around particular issues, frame visions, and instigate, sustain, and manage change. They have access to important “bully pulpits” and can reach a large number of people with their message. They possess administrative powers over budgetary procedures and priorities, financial controls, personnel, and procurement policies and face legal-political, resource, and bureaucratic constraints.⁴ They shape the organizations they lead and, as Professor Robert Cox explained in 1969, “[t]he quality of executive leadership may prove to be the most critical single determinant of the growth in the scope and authority of international organization.”⁵

Undeniably, the executive director of UNEP has a critical and important role. The explicitly normative mandate, the voluntary financing mechanism, and the organization's remoteness from the rest of the UN system have created a strong reliance on the executive director. The director is expected to continuously promote UNEP, elevate its profile, and garner political and financial support from donors whose attention might be captured by operative priorities in organizations with which they interact more frequently. Internally, the executive director is largely responsible for providing direction and vision. Externally, the executive director is critical for securing steady funding and is integral to keeping UNEP and environmental concerns more broadly on the international agenda. Thus, in effect, UNEP demands that its leader seamlessly integrate the roles of outstanding technical expert, manager, politician, and visionary. The executive directors, however, are enabled or constrained by the environment and the historical moment within which they operate. Power in international affairs is critical, but its exercise changes with shifting ideologies, economic realities, and geopolitical forces.

To make sense of UNEP's first five decades, it is essential to bring individuals back into the study of the institution and explain their influence. Effective leaders are associated with institutional growth and evolution. They attract resources to inspire and sustain creativity and innovation, and they cultivate a distinctive institutional image and identity. Indeed, perceptions of an institution are influenced by perceptions of each leadership era. In other words, people remember developments in the organization by identifying and associating them with the particular leader who oversaw a given change. "Key leaders personify an institution's image—both internally and externally," David Whetten explains. "They try to exemplify an image consistent with core institutional values."⁶ There is, however, no universally effective leadership type or style. Leadership qualities are intrinsic to the individual leader but are also shaped by the historical context in which they act. The executive's own leadership type and style determine what processes they are able to initiate and implement within the institution. Externally, the evolutionary state of the institution and the specific social-environmental context shape the field within which a director is able to operate.

At the time of UNEP's creation, the United States, as the government leading the process, offered a vision for a "United Nations Executive for Environmental Affairs." The most important function of the executive officer was to catalyze environmental concern among nation states.⁷ To this end, the Advisory Committee to the US Secretary of State wrote, the environmental executive was to be an "active, resourceful, creative leader" who would be "empowered, by the broadest possible terms of reference short of enforcement, to initiate consultations with governments [and] to go directly to the people of the nations."⁸ UNEP's first leader, Maurice Strong (1973–1975), was the architect the institution needed. Strong had envisioned and to a large extent designed the institution, as explained in chapter 2. In its early years, UNEP was a catalyst and collaborator, reflecting Strong's personality. When his deputy, Mostafa Tolba (1976–1992), assumed the post of executive director, he led the organization on an evolutionary path from the initial startup moment to an established entity. UNEP developed scientific expertise and international environmental law authority, and became a competitor to other organizations. Strong and Tolba had to craft the new institution, fight for it to have a place at the table, and implement the vision articulated at its creation.

Subsequent executive directors took on the roles of consolidator, reformer, or steward of the organization. Elizabeth Dowdeswell (1993–1998) had to carve out a role for UNEP in the age of sustainable development following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, to remake its organizational culture, and to consolidate its disparate parts. The search for UNEP's identity continued in the late 1990s and early 2000s during the age of UN reform championed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Klaus Töpfer (1998–2006) brought political energy to institutional reform and increased UNEP's visibility and resources. The reform process concluded formally only in 2012, during the second mandate of Achim Steiner (2006–2016). Having become the steward of the reform process, he received an extension of his term for another two years to begin implementation. Steiner was at the helm of UNEP during the age of the technological revolution of the 2000s and improved communications and recognition and, as a result, UNEP's authority and financial feasibility. Indeed, UNEP's overall financial resources have increased with every executive director, as figure 6.2

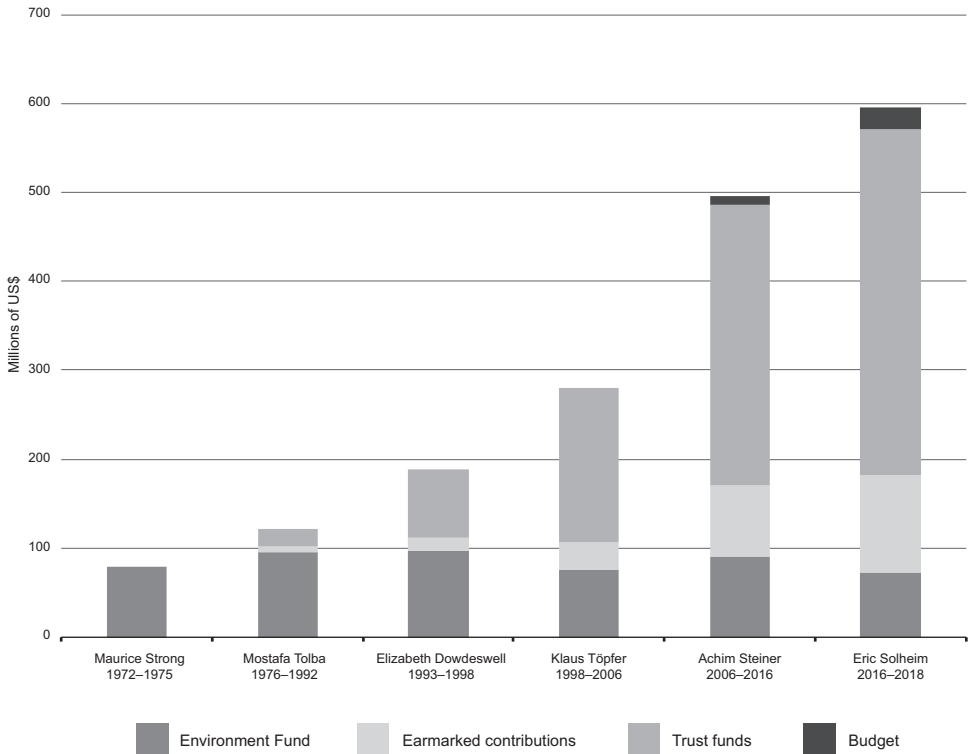


6.1 The five UNEP executive directors since 1972 (left to right): Achim Steiner, Maurice Strong, Mostafa Tolba, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, and Klaus Töpfer at the Global Environmental Governance Forum in June 2009 in Glion, Switzerland. Credit: Satishkumar Belliethathan.

illustrates, but the sources have changed as earmarked contributions have come to constitute the majority of revenues.

In 2016, Erik Solheim joined an organization on the rise. Only two years later, in 2018, amid turmoil, the new executive director suddenly had to step down and leave the organization after a highly critical UN audit report. The report identified persistent gaps in accountability, transparency, and management of travel funds, as well as deliberate defiance of rules.⁹ Inger Andersen assumed the post in June 2019 and will guide UNEP as the organization assesses its performance in its first five decades and envisions the next five.

This chapter traces the historical arc of UNEP's leadership in order to trace institutional development and evaluate performance. It presents a profile of each executive director that outlines their background, leadership type and style, vision for the organization, and the methods they used to translate their vision into action. The profiles also explain the financial situation during the tenure of each executive director and situate



6.2 UNEP average annual income, adjusted for inflation, by category and executive director.

them within the geopolitical reality of the time, the moment in history in which each leader found themselves that enabled and constrained them.

MAURICE STRONG (1973-1975)

Effectively, the Maurice Strong era began in 1970 when the UN General Assembly appointed him Secretary-General of the planned United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Chapter 2 described his leadership during the preparatory process and the two weeks of the Stockholm Conference. On December 13, 1972, the UN General Assembly unanimously elected Maurice Strong to the post of executive director of the new United Nations Environment Programme, but Strong took on the job reluctantly. “This was not at all what I had planned,” he wrote in

his memoir, *Where on Earth Are We Going?* He had accepted the position of Secretary-General of the Stockholm Conference with a clear commitment to return to his post in the government of Canada. His entrepreneurial leadership was critical to the success of the Conference, and governments had recognized how indispensable it would be for the successful launch of the new institution. After the decision was made in the fall of 1972 to site UNEP in Nairobi, the Swedish and other industrialized governments pushed particularly hard for Strong to become executive director. "Distance [from the other UN organizations] was seen as a real impediment," Strong noted, and "they wanted to minimize the difficulties of the Nairobi location by at least avoiding a potentially divisive and uncertain search for an acceptable head, and they knew I'd have broad support from all regions."¹⁰ After consultations with Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Strong accepted the offer to become UNEP's first leader. "I agreed to a full term," he recalled, "but it was privately understood that I'd return to Canada as soon as I felt the new body had been firmly established."¹¹

VISIONARY AND PRAGMATIC LEADERSHIP

Both a visionary and a pragmatist, Strong was the original architect of UNEP. In 1973, UNEP "consisted of nothing more than a General Assembly Resolution and me," Strong wrote, "and I needed to start from the ground up in translating it into a reality." Strong's vision was to create a source of power and authority for the environment that could coordinate and rationalize environmental activities within the United Nations family. He was convinced that the new environmental institution should not have operational functions so it would not have to compete with the organizations it was expected to influence and that it should be a collaborator, a catalyst, and a coordinator.¹²

His first tasks were pragmatic: he needed to recruit people to Nairobi and establish the organization's physical presence. Mostafa Tolba, the energetic Egyptian minister who had been such an asset during the Stockholm negotiations, had impressed Strong as a highly qualified scientist. Strong requested that UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim appoint Tolba as Deputy Director of UNEP, and a small and dedicated team of

international experts followed. As a UNEP staff member noted, Strong “hand-picked his staff and had confidence in people to do the job.”¹³ He was able to attract individuals with both a passion for the environment and the requisite expertise. In this endeavor, Strong built on the network he had created in the run-up to the Stockholm Conference, where he had managed to assemble a team of over 150 scientific and intellectual leaders from fifty-eight countries to serve as consultants for the conference. As Mostafa Tolba observed, “Strong had a talent for spotting people to work with him and created top notch combinations.”¹⁴ His extensive personal contacts and the respect he commanded in the business and government sectors contributed to his ability to put forth a progressive environmental agenda and galvanize support at a macro and micro level.

Strong’s second priority was to identify a physical location for the fledgling entity. For this purpose, he opted to move from the original offices in the Kenyatta Conference Center in downtown Nairobi, which were not “symbolic of our environmental purposes,” as Strong noted, and not suitable for future expansion. He secured a large coffee farm in the outskirts of Nairobi to build a new complex that would suit the needs of the organization. UNEP remains in the Gigiri district of Nairobi, next to the Karura forest, and Gigiri has become the home of the UN complex, which hosts over twenty UN bodies.

The framers of UNEP at Stockholm had set out a powerful new vision for a catalytic institution, and Strong laid the groundwork to deliver on UNEP’s core mandate to monitor the environment and catalyze environmental action across the UN system. In its early years, UNEP also helped create new national environmental institutions in countries around the world. Strong, building on relationships forged in the lead-up to the Stockholm Conference, engaged with governments around the world in setting up environmental ministries and agencies. In just one example among many, Strong recalled the creation of such an agency in China: “Stockholm created a binding relationship for me and China, because as I went on to head UNEP, they at the same time created their environmental agency—first an environmental protection unit, which would grow into an environmental protection agency and an environmental ministry.”¹⁵ Within only a few years, national environmental institutions would spring up within most of the world’s governments.

Although he had little formal education, Maurice Strong exercised impressive intellectual leadership. He had a talent for coining new catch phrases that would become powerful intellectual concepts. “Outer limits” and “eco-development” became key concepts in his advocacy for an ecological, systemic approach to the management of global risks that would impact humanity’s future. As a result, UNEP established an “outer limits” program to identify major global risks, including climate change and, as early as 1973, convened scientists to review the state of affairs on climate change. Charismatic and inspirational, Strong motivated followers and nurtured a culture of excitement. His vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision stimulated performance. His management experience and acumen, ability to establish trustful personal relations, and outstanding diplomatic skills made his short tenure at UNEP quite successful. “He had the skills to help people who didn’t agree to work together, and people who were pessimistic or overly utilitarian to see that they could change things,” wrote reporter John Ralston Saul.¹⁶

CATALYTIC MANAGEMENT

In his own words, Maurice Strong’s management approach was “never to confront but to co-opt, never to bully but to equivocate, and never to yield.”¹⁷ He had built a successful though controversial career as an oil tycoon in Canada and had been an outstanding manager. He invested in enabling UNEP to fulfill its core mandate to review and assess the state of the environment. “Right from the beginning,” Strong recalled in our interview, “it was envisaged that UNEP would be engaged in monitoring what was happening through Earthwatch. But that didn’t mean it did it all. It meant it had to put it all together.”¹⁸ He saw UNEP as bringing all the component elements of the environment together in one framework within the UN system. Often, however, UNEP found itself in competition with other UN bodies. “We had only the reluctant cooperation of the agencies,” Strong remarked, “that saw us as a competitor especially when we did anything that was operational.” UNEP therefore worked on providing guidance to the agencies in their operational work. From the beginning, Strong envisioned close collaboration between UNEP and UNDP, the two bodies working on the twin issues of environment and

development, but he was not able to deliver on that vision. "I proposed that UNDP develop a policy on environment [and] that UNEP have a unit to work with UNDP and UNDP have a unit to work with UNEP," Strong noted. "That UNDP do the operational part of our program. And even that UNDP run our fund, the Environment Fund. That never happened."¹⁹ Indeed, the inertia in the system was too strong to overcome, and without regular interactions, political incentives, and adequate financial means, such transformation was impossible.

PUSH FOR PARADIGM CHANGE

In the geopolitical context of oil crises and an economic downturn in the 1970s, the environment began slipping down on governments' agendas. With UNEP rather removed from the centers of power and the mainstream UN discussions, sustaining substantive interest and financial support became a challenge.

The environment–development linkage was one of Strong's priorities, and he worked on integrating the ideas from the Founex workshop that had ensured the success of the Stockholm Conference into the work of UNEP (see chapter 2). In 1974 Gamani Corea of Sri Lanka, one of the Founex participants, became Secretary-General of UNCTAD, the main UN body working on trade and development. Strong worked with Corea and several of the other leading intellectuals of the Stockholm Conference to convene a joint UNEP/UNCTAD symposium on "Patterns of Resource Use, Environment and Development Strategies" in 1974 in Cocoyoc, Mexico. Barbara Ward of the United Kingdom chaired the symposium, and Johan Galtung of Norway and Ignacy Sachs of France wrote the first draft of the proceedings, which would become the flagship Cocoyoc Declaration. Seen by some as radical and provocative, the declaration was "the first international document that articulated the need for change in the lifestyles and patterns of production and consumption," Branislav Gosovic, a UN official who joined UNEP in 1974, wrote. It pointed out that poverty and the environmental crisis stemmed from the same root cause of "maldevelopment" and called for "structural, systemic and paradigm changes in the existing world economic, political, as well as technological order."²⁰ As Gosovic recounts, soon thereafter, "Strong received,

in Nairobi, a long telex from the State Department, signed [by Secretary of State] Kissinger ... The telex stated that most of these problems had no place either in the document or on the agenda of an environment organization, and should be left to other competent fora to deal with, while UNEP should limit itself strictly to 'environmental problems.'²¹ UNEP was beginning to attract opposition from countries that perceived the organization as a threat to their interests.

At the same time, developing countries united behind a proposal for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that sought to directly address the enduring inequalities in the international system, which sharpened tensions between developed and developing countries. This threatened the established economic and political status quo, and when, in 1974, developing countries passed the declaration on the New International Economic Order, the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, and the Cocoloc Declaration within the United Nations, this reinforced the perception that the United Nations supported radical, systemic changes that might result in a move away from capitalism.²² UNEP came down clearly on one side of the political argument as it argued explicitly that economic inequalities had led to grave environmental problems, especially in developing countries, and were a "barrier to the harmonious development of mankind."²³ Thus, while UNEP had been at the core of political debates at its inception, as governments changed, especially in industrialized countries, and priorities shifted, it was pushed out of the political debate and forced to be more of a technical organization.

The financial implications were notable. Although major donors did not decrease their financial contributions, they did not augment them and, in the context of the inflation crisis in the early 1980s, UNEP's income plummeted (see figure 2.2 in chapter 2). Governments had urged integration and linkage among the range of issues that demanded international attention, but these remained hollow statements at international fora, and a silo approach continued. Separate institutions focused on separate problems but vied for attention and resources from the same governments, which fostered competition rather than cooperation and reinforced the existing economic and political structures, as chapters 3 and 4 illustrated. In this context, as early as December 1974, a former staff member remarked, Strong "was already saying he was just there to start

something and then he was going to leave. He wasn't an administrator; he liked to create and catalyze things, get them going and then go on to something else."²⁴ Aware of Strong's intention to leave UNEP early and return to Canada, UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim asked Strong to meet and engage with Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the Permanent Representative of Peru at the United Nations and President of the Security Council in 1974. The meeting in New York, Strong recalled in our 2008 interview, would eventually lead to Strong's appointment as head the Rio Earth Summit many years later.

In 1971, to ensure the backing of developing countries and the Soviet Bloc in the contested selection of a UN Secretary-General, Waldheim sought support from Peru, which was emerging as a leader among developing nations. Pérez de Cuéllar, Peru's Ambassador to the UN at that time, had just been called from his post in Moscow, where he had opened the first Peruvian embassy. As Strong explained, "Waldheim had promised the Peruvians to make Pérez de Cuéllar an Under-Secretary-General, and the only post he could see possible was the executive director post in UNEP." Since Strong was preparing to leave, Waldheim saw an opportunity to deliver on his promise. During the meeting with Pérez de Cuéllar, however, Strong understood that "he didn't know anything about the field, had not the least bit of interest in going to Nairobi, and would have been a terrible choice." So, rather than convincing Pérez de Cuéllar to take the job, Strong decided to tell Waldheim that he would remain executive director for another year, so that Pérez de Cuéllar would not have the option to accept or decline. A few years later, in 1980, Pérez de Cuéllar would become UN Secretary-General. "And we laughed," Strong recalled, "and said 'if you had gone to Nairobi, you would have never become Secretary-General.'" This, Strong acknowledged, "affected my appointment for Rio because Pérez de Cuéllar was Secretary-General at that time and appointed me to the post."

Strong left UNEP at the end of 1975, after only a couple of years at the helm, at a point when the organization was still weak and fragile. As Mark Halle, one of his close associates, remarked, Strong "left too early. People really liked the idea [of UNEP], but it really needed to be worked out and all the kinks ironed out so that it could develop into something a lot more solid before stepping back and letting it develop on its own.

It's not so much a critique of Maurice because that's the kind of person he was but it soon slipped back into a more traditional vision of how a UN organization should work."²⁵ This transition took place during the tenure of Mostafa Tolba, Maurice Strong's deputy who would lead the institution for the next seventeen years and put a lasting stamp on it.

MOSTAFA TOLBA (1976–1992)

At the end of 1975, Mostafa Tolba succeeded Maurice Strong as executive director. The clean transfer of power lent legitimacy to Tolba and to the organization. Tolba was unanimously elected by the UN General Assembly to complete the final year of Strong's term and ensure continuity in the organization. He was then subsequently elected for four consecutive four-year terms and would become the longest-serving executive director with a total of seventeen years at UNEP's helm.

CONVINCING AND COERCIVE SCIENCE DIPLOMACY

Tolba possessed core competencies in both science and diplomacy and was particularly adept at combining them.²⁶ He brought to bear intellectual, structural, and entrepreneurial leadership. As Oran Young explains, intellectual leaders produce intellectual capital and create systems of thought that determine outcomes; structural leaders translate access to material resources into bargaining leverage; and entrepreneurial leaders exhibit negotiating skills that foster creative deals.²⁷ Tolba deployed intellectual innovation, bargaining leverage, and negotiating skills. "I went into my position as executive director of UNEP with varied experiences," Tolba recalled in our conversations, "academic, science, planning, diplomatic, political, and executive. I think that that helped me a lot in moving ahead with UNEP."²⁸ He had unquenchable thirst for knowledge and impressive interdisciplinary technical capacity and was known for continuously retraining himself. "I'm a microbiologist," Tolba noted, "but I taught myself law because of the international treaties; I taught myself economics because of the cost-benefits of Montreal and climate change from economists or international lawyers. I sat with them in their meetings, as a student, learning from them."²⁹ During Tolba's tenure, UNEP's intellectual prowess increased as it focused on keeping the environment

under review. For example, UNEP installed GIS stations around Africa and strengthened its climate impact studies program, and developed a series of major multilateral environmental conventions. In the process, UNEP evolved into an authoritative environmental institution.

Tolba's intellectual drive shaped global environmental governance. He coined the term "development without destruction," which was effectively the foundation for what would come to be known as sustainable development. Tolba wrote in 1982 that "One of the most fundamental problems confronting mankind at present is how to meet the basic needs and requirements of all people on earth without simultaneously destroying the resource base, that is the environment, from which ultimately these needs have to be met."³⁰ This was five years before the Brundtland Commission officially defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."³¹ Throughout his tenure with UNEP, Tolba adhered to "development without destruction" as his guiding philosophy—both personally and for the organization.³² This ideology effectively emphasized the environment as a core precondition for human life and development. As UNEP's slogan for World Environment Day 1988 proclaimed: "when people put environment first, development will last."³³

Tolba's leadership style derived from his powerful personality and high visibility. Able to broker deals that were perceived as impossible, he was convincing and, where necessary, coercive. A hardnosed negotiator, he described himself as a "head basher." He forged conventions and agreements by the force of his character, leveraging both his charisma and extensive scientific knowledge. He recognized that there were two sides for every convention—the demands of developing countries and those of developed countries—and, in between the two, there was the issue of the money.³⁴ Tolba knew that he could not deal with these issues as mathematical equations but instead had to approach them as political equations. He was an innovator who blended the structural power he derived from his connections to developing countries with his extensive technical knowledge. Tolba played a critical role in translating rapidly evolving scientific knowledge into political, policy, and legal terms relevant to the intensive institutional bargaining that took place at the time.³⁵

Both an African and an Arab, Tolba could connect directly with a number of countries on their own terms. Perceived as an overt supporter of developing countries, he also had the backing of the Eastern Bloc countries and was therefore often seen as opposing what the United States considered to be its interests.³⁶ As a former high-level US official noted, "Mostafa had made himself the darling of the Group of 77 and was seen to be pretty much in their camp."³⁷ Tolba, however, considered himself an honest broker among the various countries and interests. Adept at political maneuvering, he was able to move UNEP's agenda forward, but in the process, he often alienated the United States and its Western allies. His behavior with member states grew confrontational when he saw any one government as a possible obstacle to his agenda.

Tolba became infamous for his "bullying, cajoling, wheedling and threatening tactics," noted Fiona McConnell, who led the UK delegation in the biodiversity negotiations leading up to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. "He was unwaveringly courteous to the US because as he told us all, he did not want to give them an excuse to walk out. But to everyone else he distributed his contempt even-handedly. Japan was accused of taking up space and saying nothing. India was attacked for talking too much. The UK was blinkered, mean and would not listen to Darwin if he were still alive."³⁸ In essence, while Tolba's intellectual leadership helped carve out substantive authority for UNEP, the organization's appeal as a collaborator began to diminish in the face of the harsh diplomatic approach employed by the executive director both internally and externally.

VISION FOR NORMATIVE AND OPERATIONAL REACH

Tolba's vision for UNEP was that it would develop the environmental agenda along with a framework of law, practice, and incentives and that it would provide the necessary support for implementation, especially in developing countries. He chose to put his unflinching energy into getting large pieces of the environmental policy infrastructure in place and launched nearly all of the major environmental conventions, thus making UNEP a clear normative leader. Indeed, Tolba was widely regarded as "solely responsible for the ozone and biodiversity conventions."³⁹ As

explained in chapter 4, the achievements of the Montreal Protocol and the success story of the ozone regime can be traced to Tolba's and UNEP's leadership.

Tolba was impatient with the Maurice Strong vision of a highly normative agency and preferred to work on an agenda of tangible activities that he was confident he could accomplish.⁴⁰ For Tolba there could be no normative impact without an operational footprint: he firmly believed that any organization that could not give practical help to countries was never going to get support, be it political or financial. Tolba's measure of success, then, became what the organization could deliver on its own, rather than its effectiveness as a catalyst within the UN system. This focus, however, meant that UNEP was seen as more of a competitor than a collaborator by other UN agencies. Facing increasing demands from developing countries, UNEP became a support agency with greater on-the-ground delivery. This was a move that would be difficult to reverse and would lead to tensions that still affect the organization today.

AUTHORITARIAN MANAGEMENT

The commanding leadership and controlling management style of Tolba led to a clear direction in the organization, but it also created a cult of personality. Imposing and commanding, Tolba could not be challenged, and the institution evolved in a highly hierarchical manner. Tolba "brought to UNEP the management style of his culture from Egypt, loyalty to the top man," a former staff member noted.⁴¹ Another called his management style "pharaonic" and commented that the management culture was "that of a pyramid. God speaks and everybody responds."⁴² Mark Halle remarked that Tolba "was an authoritative figure but very quick to support you and congratulate you when he thought you were doing good work, and to acknowledge that work, and pretty quick to come down on you hard if you messed up."⁴³ This authoritarian leadership and management style drove productivity, but the need to claim credit led to turf battles among divisions and a political environment in which staff had to fight for the leader's favor.⁴⁴

This organizational culture became one marked by territoriality. Indeed, there were "cultures within culture,"⁴⁵ as staff noted, and these persisted

for years after Tolba's departure. This atmosphere, coupled with prolonged absences due to his heavy travel schedule, presented challenges to establishing, exercising, and delegating authority. Tolba trusted very few individuals to make decisions in his absence, which caused backlogs. As a result, UNEP "gained the reputation of being an incredibly sluggish bureaucracy, impossible to get anything done," Mark Halle noted, "particularly because Tolba insisted that he, personally, should approve things that should have been decisions taken three or four levels down."⁴⁶

Tolba recognized that his leadership style was seen as coercive and that it had engendered opposition among governments, and he acknowledged that this resulted in environmental issues being steered away from UNEP and into alternative institutional arrangements. This was perhaps most obvious when governments established a negotiating committee, and later a secretariat, for climate change under the UN Secretary-General rather than within UNEP or the World Meteorological Organization, the two institutions that had been most assertive on the need to address climate change at the global scale and had jointly created the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. "Obviously," Tolba lamented, "the West did not want to give climate change negotiations to UNEP, to Mostafa Tolba. They clearly did not want another Montreal Protocol."⁴⁷ Indeed, as new environmental institutions emerged, they became independent of UNEP and ultimately more competitors than collaborators, which presented a challenge to UNEP's core functions, as the analysis in chapter 3 illustrated.

LAISSEZ-FAIRE CAPITALISM AND FALLING FINANCES

The original high financial ambitions for UNEP did not materialize. "The United Nations Environment Programme has been having an uncomfortable time of late," wrote Richard Sandbrook of the International Institute for Environment and Development in the UK in a 1976 issue of *Nature*. "Not only are funding problems now hampering the agency; there also appears to be increasing dissent about the work programme, both within and without the Secretariat."⁴⁸ As laissez-faire capitalism gained ground, some governments—the United States and the United Kingdom in particular—lowered taxes and decreased regulation, and attention shifted to domestic economic priorities. Environmental issues

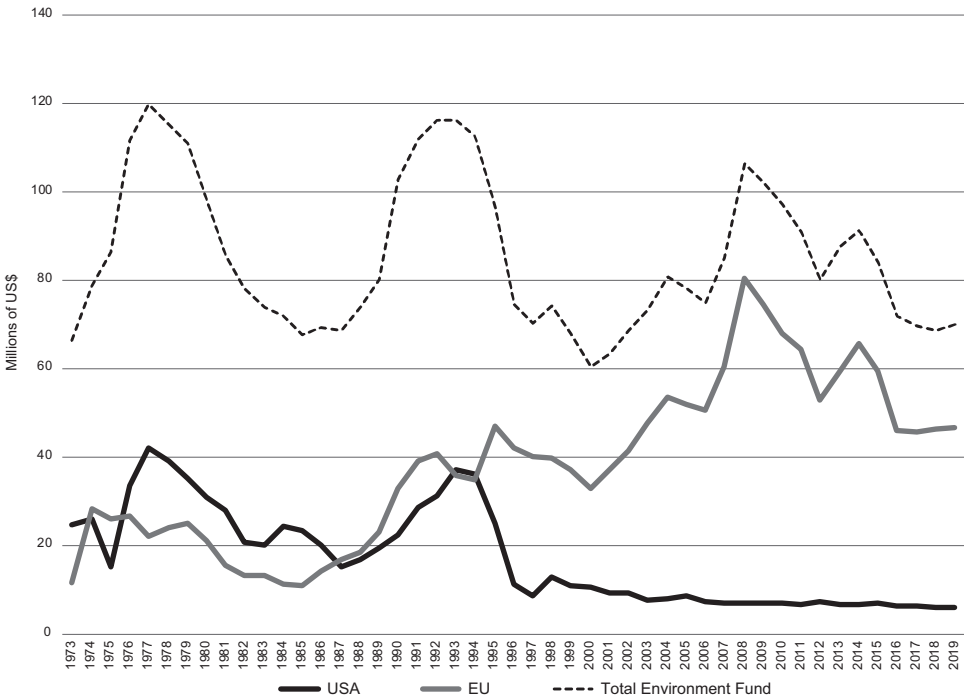
took a backseat to pressing economic concerns, and contributions did not reach the levels envisioned at the time of creation.⁴⁹ “Some Western leaders,” Barbara Ward wrote in 1982, “are starting to abandon the concept of our joint voyage on Spaceship Earth, and to dismiss any concern for the environment or for underdeveloped nations as ‘do-goodism.’”⁵⁰ This political context had considerable economic and therefore performance repercussions.

Hyperinflation in the 1970s reduced the value of the financial contributions of all governments, even as they maintained the same level of contributions. In 1980, Tolba admonished the Governing Council that “the resources currently available to the Environment Fund affected as they are both by inflation and stagnation are not of such importance as to offer any but the most minimal inducement to our partners.”⁵¹ He reiterated this message two years later at UNEP’s ten-year anniversary. “In 1982 we find ourselves in very different circumstances,” he told governments. “The problems we faced in 1972 have been compounded, and instead of stepping up efforts aimed at solving them we find that the Stockholm commitment has begun to flag. In the face of the global economic recession the temptation has been for the international community to relegate the environment to a position of secondary importance.”⁵² In real terms, the Environment Fund decreased from close to \$247 million in 1978–1979 to \$149 million in 1984–1985, a 40 percent plunge, which rendered UNEP powerless (see figure 2.2 in chapter 2).

Political developments in the United States, originally the strongest advocate of UNEP, led to a dramatic decrease in diplomatic and financial support to multilateralism and the environment and thus to the United Nations and UNEP. With the Reagan administration taking office in 1981, UNEP lost its most important champion, which resulted in a gradual decrease in global contributions. The Reagan administration was “defensive and even hostile towards multilateral cooperation for resolving global environmental problems,” a 1981 UN General Assembly report about UNEP noted.⁵³ Anne Gorsuch, the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, had little knowledge about UNEP, the UN system, and the environment-development nexus. Analysts observed that the US delegation in Nairobi was “widely perceived as abdicating its advocacy role.”⁵⁴ US financial contributions declined from \$10 million in

1980 to \$7.8 million in 1982 and stayed below \$10 million for the duration of Reagan’s term in office, which, coupled with inflation, reduced resources considerably. In the mid-1980s, European countries began increasing their contributions and would ultimately become the biggest donors to UNEP (see figure 6.3).

These financial difficulties translated into operational challenges and diminished authority. When governments created the Global Environment Facility, as chapter 3 explained, UNEP both suffered some loss in authority and gained a source of financing as it became one of the three implementing agencies for the GEF, along with UNDP and the World Bank. Mostafa Tolba had a chip on his shoulder about the GEF. “Tolba and I were just completely at loggerheads,” recalled Mohamed El-Ashry, the inaugural CEO and Chairman of the GEF, because of the issue of national environment versus global environment. “In all global forums,



6.3 US and EU contributions to the Environment Fund, adjusted for inflation, from 1973 to 2019.

UN or otherwise,” El-Ashry explained, “Tolba would say in his remarks the ‘Global Facility for the Environment.’ And I would come back and say it’s the ‘Global Environment Facility’ because it deals with the global environment and not all environment. So, he would just nod his head and the next time he makes a remark he would say the ‘Global Facility for the Environment’ again. That was ongoing.”⁵⁵ While Tolba’s commanding leadership had made UNEP successful initially, in time countries and partner organizations began to see Tolba’s influence as an increasing threat. He continued to vehemently defend environmental pursuits but was faced with an increasingly unreceptive milieu.

UNEP ON THE SIDELINES

In 1983, UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (who served from 1982 to 1991) created the World Commission on Environment and Development to review issues at the nexus of environment and development, assess the achievements in the fifteen years since Stockholm, and imagine how to take a quantum leap forward.⁵⁶ Even though UNEP had been the primary institution leading this agenda, the twenty-member commission was independent, and Pérez de Cuéllar appointed then–Prime Minister of Norway Gro Harlem Brundtland as Chair. Maurice Strong was a member of the Commission but not Mostafa Tolba, which alienated the executive director and, as a result, the entire institution. Tolba had really wanted to run the commission and felt that producing the report was “UNEP’s job” and that all the “attempts to innovate and create something new were ... a threat to what he was trying to do,” Mark Halle explained.⁵⁷ In 1987, the Brundtland Commission produced a report, *Our Common Future*, which defined sustainable development, put it firmly on the map of international affairs, and strongly influenced the agenda of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

Tolba expected that the preparations for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit would largely be entrusted to UNEP, or that at the very least he would have a major, controlling role in it. In February 1990, before the first preparatory committee for the conference, Pérez de Cuéllar appointed Maurice Strong as the Secretary-General for the conference. Tolba was unhappy with this choice and opted to withdraw individually and institutionally.

As a result, and to its detriment, UNEP did not play an active role in the two-year preparatory process for the Rio Earth Summit.

Maurice Strong had insisted that all UN agencies contribute and engage in the drafting of the voluminous documentation for the conference and that they focus more on substance than on their own institutional interests. However, according to Ambassador Lars-Göran Engfeldt, UNEP was the one agency that did not cooperate. He noted that throughout the process, UNEP “acted largely on its own and made only minimal contributions to the collective effort.”⁵⁸ Moreover, a member of the Rio secretariat recalled that senior UNEP staff had clear instructions from the executive director not to provide any data or information for the conference.⁵⁹

Tolba was driven by a desire to protect UNEP from the negative effects of organizational changes in the UN system and acted in a manner that was remarkably similar to that of the UN specialized agencies in advance of the Stockholm Conference. He protected his organizational turf as best he could, and the geographical remoteness of UNEP allowed him to disengage from the Rio Earth Summit preparations. It also insulated UNEP from interaction with others. As Mark Halle remarked, Tolba “felt that if UNEP could simply ignore [the conference] and show that they were peeved, people would come running to UNEP, but they never did.”⁶⁰ The sidelining of UNEP in the lead-up to Rio left a lasting impression on Tolba. In 2008 he bemoaned:

I was the one who suggested to the Governing Council of UNEP that we should have an international conference to commemorate the twenty years after Stockholm, and they made that recommendation to the General Assembly. And they wanted it as a session of a special character, like the one in '82. And we prepared—[the report] *The World Environment 1972 to 1992: Two Decades of Challenge*. So, it was UNEP all through. Maurice Strong came and found all that ready and put all that we—UNEP, FAO, UNESCO, and WHO—did on the environment into one book and came up with Agenda 21. One of the things I was telling Maurice all throughout—he and his deputy came to Nairobi several times—and I said, “For God’s sake, this is a *huge* agenda and people will put it on their shelves and nobody will implement anything. Pick one or two examples—water, air, whatever—that *can* be corrected, and say how much it will cost the world and where are the responsibilities of the developed and developing countries and give them a cost estimate.” So that, when they look into the rest of their agenda, they have a clear vision of the cost and their priorities. They didn’t do that, they wanted to come with the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21.⁶¹

Dr. Mostafa Tolba implemented the vision for UNEP and led the institution when it was a pioneer in the field. He shaped UNEP as an authority in its own right, asserted its scientific eminence, and created a body of international environmental law. He pushed through a series of global environmental agreements on a range of important issues, but he stayed too long and outlasted his legacy.⁶² Importantly, as the world was preparing for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, Tolba misread the fact that governments were ready for another wave of thinking on the environment and another phase of experimentation with environmental institutions. He saw a threat and removed himself and UNEP from the Rio process. Somewhat ironically, some of Tolba's core achievements—the conventions on climate, biodiversity, and desertification—were finalized at the Rio Earth Summit, but two of the three conventions were set up as completely independent entities.

Consequently, UNEP became one of many institutions rather than the center of gravity it was envisioned to be, and it has come to be perceived as weak and ineffective. That perception has persisted for decades. In 2018, at the height of the controversy around the resignation of Executive Director Erik Solheim, the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* reported that “There are many who don’t think UNEP is functioning as it shall, and that there are other means of promoting environmental issues that can be more effective.”⁶³ In the final analysis, however, the Mostafa Tolba era at UNEP was characterized by the creation of a robust body of international environmental law and the resolution of key environmental problems, the most important being ozone depletion. “If you start listing what Tolba achieved,” Mark Halle noted, “it’s an amazing record. But I guess it depended far too much on his personally. That was the downside of it.”⁶⁴

ELIZABETH DOWDESWELL (1993–1998)

Canadian Elizabeth (Liz) Dowdeswell assumed the post of UNEP executive director in 1993, a particularly challenging time in its history. This was the end of an era, as the two previous holders of this post had been directly involved in its conceptualization and had, over the subsequent twenty years, both put their stamp on the organization and helped shape

global environmental governance. Just a year after the Rio Earth Summit, she had to keep UNEP afloat while making it relevant to the new international priorities. Dowdeswell also had to deal with governments that were distrustful of UNEP and unwilling to lend it full support. The geopolitical context was qualitatively different from UNEP's first twenty years, as "economic recessions, fratricidal conflicts, natural and man-made disasters" required that governments act, but the steps they were taking to address the relationship between population, consumption, and natural resources were too few and too slow.⁶⁵ Moreover, every UN agency now defined their programs in terms of sustainable development, and the competition among them for political attention and financial resources was intense.

BIG PICTURE VISION, DISRUPTIVE CONSENSUS SEEKER

Although neither a scientist nor an environment minister, Dowdeswell was keenly aware of the interconnections among environmental and social issues. She had served as Canada's Assistant Deputy Minister of Environment with responsibility for the Atmospheric Environment Service and for negotiating the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Within the Canadian government, Dowdeswell had worked on a variety of issues, and what distinguishes her from most of UNEP's executive directors is the breadth of her engagement in social causes. "I've worked in culture and the arts, in education, science and technology, innovation," she noted in an interview in 2014. She sought to create consensus about the identity and place of the institution she was heading, but she would have to disrupt the existing state of affairs in the process.

Entrepreneurial and committed, Dowdeswell joined UNEP with a clear recognition of the requirements of a leader of an international institution and the need to transform UNEP. She sought to build on its strengths, tackle its weaknesses, and work with others in expanding UNEP's agenda. Seeking consensus within and outside the organization, she set out to rethink UNEP's unique role in the post-Rio reality but was beset by extraordinary difficulties, many beyond her control. UNEP had to reinvent itself and redefine its value proposition to better respond to the notion of balancing of people, planet, and prosperity.

Dowdeswell envisioned UNEP as an organization that looks at the world as a whole and communicates the big picture. She saw an organization that brings governments together to try and find pathways that actually work for everybody, and one that helps countries that need help in terms of finances and capacity. She was committed to attaining that vision by pursuing a drastically different style of management, one based on consensus rather than commanding top-down directives.

She had come into UNEP with the conviction that an effective leader needed to perform both a leadership function and a management function. The leadership function was to provide insight and inspiration and move the institution to where it needed to be both externally and internally. But she recognized that a leader was also responsible for the sound management of both financial and human resources. So, Dowdeswell remarked, "I needed to step back and look at the original vision and mission and say: 'Is that still valid?' And if it is so, given this new context, how is that actually interpreted, how is that vision operationalized, and what may change? And I needed to consider whether we had the right set of skills and abilities within the organization, the right structure, and the conducive political reality so I could move ahead."⁶⁶ That required rethinking and reorganization.

In her first meeting with UNEP staff, Dowdeswell started by saying, "I am going to cause constructive damage to the status quo,"⁶⁷ a comment that many staff members considered threatening. When asked in a 2014 interview what she meant by this statement, she responded that her comment was grounded in the realization of the extent of environmental change. "Evidence was piling up about the unprecedented pace and breadth of environmental degradation occurring around the world," she explained, and "it was becoming apparent that there really wasn't any room for complacency." Dowdeswell was convinced that the attitudes and behavior of institutions and individuals would be difficult to change but that it was imperative to do so. "I think that's what I meant by causing constructive damage," she noted.⁶⁸ But change had to happen within the organization as well and many staff were wary of the threat to the status quo.

PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT AND SEXISM CHALLENGES

Mostafa Tolba's departure had left a massive vacuum. The whole institution had evolved around a personality and had melded with him to have an almost synonymous identity. Everything at UNEP had been done vertically. Dowdeswell set out to change that, which made many staff members wary, suspicious, and fearful. Her attempts to create a new vision for UNEP were met with resistance even from program proponents.⁶⁹ One observer noted that the permanent representatives in Nairobi opposed Dowdeswell "with blood and body; she just could not convince them of her attempts at reform."⁷⁰ Many staff members remained loyal to Tolba and blocked any attempt at reform. "I was told that these were simply concepts of Western management that were not appropriate and wouldn't work in the UN system," Dowdeswell observed.⁷¹ Or, as a former staff member pointed out, they knew how to deal with Tolba but didn't know how to deal with Dowdeswell, who broke down the familiar verticality. UNEP went from one extreme—a top-down management style—to another, a horizontal management style.

Committed to working in partnership, Dowdeswell sought to build consensus through participation or what many called a "Canadian approach." Managing through consultation and participation was a painstaking, drawn-out process that clashed with the conventional tactics of what staff called the Tolba feudal empire.⁷² The "participatory management style angered many, dismayed others, and alienated the rest," a staff member remarked. Many of the professionals at UNEP had no experience with such a management style, either prior to joining the organization or during their time at UNEP. Dowdeswell's push for democratic leadership created paralysis, increased resentment, and resulted in inefficiency, which generated a perception that the executive director could not make decisions. Difficulties in attaining goals precipitated a vicious cycle of declining internal productivity, coupled with rapidly evaporating international relevance.

Committed to introducing accountability and results-based management, Dowdeswell challenged staff to be clear about what their mandate was, what they were going to be held accountable for delivering, and how they interacted with other parts of the system.⁷³ She recognized that improving environmental governance required systems thinking

and integrated approaches. She pushed for change in UNEP's existing work, which was based on projects and organized in twelve sectors. She structured task teams to re-plan the organization from the bottom up. "What was amazing to me from some of those meetings," one staff member noted, "[was that] you would see staff members from the same division talking about what they were doing and discovering for the first time what their next-door neighbor was doing."⁷⁴ Dowdeswell broke silos within the organization, a process that inevitably caused some consternation and dissatisfaction.

Dowdeswell also adjusted the relationship between UNEP's headquarters and its regional offices so that their directors became her direct deputies around the world. Along with this, she set out to disrupt the political nature of staff appointments and institute an apolitical recruitment process, a performance appraisal system, and accountability mechanisms. "In my view," she noted, "politics is not the basis on which a sound organization should be built. But certainly, the organization I inherited had positions earmarked. I was told that this was essentially a Japanese position and this was a European position and so on. This reality, however, was not only what UNEP experienced, it was throughout the whole UN system. And ... the system's that way for whatever reason so you can't change everything overnight, but I tried to." Over time, UNEP "began to develop a culture of accountability and a results orientation," Dowdeswell reflected. She created a trust fund for managerial innovation and excellence. "It was a time where we were trying to up our game in terms of attracting financial resources and also in the management and development of our human resources—learning to work as multidisciplinary teams, having real performance appraisals, holding people to account."⁷⁵ The political challenges, however, were serious, because she was a bureaucrat rather than a politician and thus did not excel at handling the ministers from a range of different countries and backgrounds with the special treatment they expected.

The new executive director was also hampered by overt sexism. Ambassador Engfeldt noted that there were "embarrassing elements of a gender bias in attitudes of some diplomatic representatives in Nairobi and within the Secretariat."⁷⁶ In the 1990s, there were very few women in high positions at the United Nations, and Dowdeswell had an inherently more

difficult time building legitimacy as a woman from the Global North holding a position of power in a paternalistic environment recently vacated by a traditional masculine leader. As one UNEP staff member recalled, "I can remember one of the senior African managers in the organization said one day, 'In my country there's an expression: when you have a woman general, be prepared to die bravely.'"⁷⁷ Sexism was prevalent in the high levels of Kenya's government at the time, which inevitably curbed Dowdeswell's authority and effectiveness. As Joe Khamisi recounts, when US Ambassador Smith Hempstone left Kenya in February 1993, two women took on the post consecutively, Aurelia E. Brazeal (1993–1996) and Prudence Bushnell (1996–1999). Kenyan President Moi considered that a signal of America's disregard for his country. "Moi was convinced that the US government was intentionally sending him women as a message that he was just not good enough to merit a white male," Bushnell wrote.⁷⁸

The explicit sexism and the fierce opposition Dowdeswell encountered from some of the permanent representatives in Nairobi and some of the staff at headquarters detracted from her ability to assert positive, authoritative leadership in a context in which excessive reliance on and deference to top management had prevailed. Some member states, however, recognized the challenges she had to overcome. "I was impressed by Liz Dowdeswell," said Idunn Eidheim, former deputy director general of the Norwegian Ministry of Environment. "Tolba had run UNEP like his own organization, and she sought to be an effective administrator."⁷⁹ The environment within which she had to operate, however, was not conducive to her management style and hampered many of her efforts.

NEOLIBERAL ECONOMICS AND PRECARIOUS FINANCING

Significant economic and political shifts affected the attention to and investment in UNEP during Dowdeswell's tenure. The new neoliberal economic model, combined with the minor economic recession that occurred in the early 1990s, led the international community to focus on economic growth, often at any cost.⁸⁰ It was an "awfully ungrateful time to be running an environment agency," Mark Halle remarked.⁸¹ Environmental issues had fallen precipitously down the political agenda in many countries and

were increasingly couched in terms of economic costs rather than human rights. Driven by global competition for market share, governments put short-term economic gains at the top of their priorities. Under this framing, even if developing countries were to willingly adopt measures to halt environmental deterioration, they would risk their place in the global economy in the immediate term. Saddled with huge debts, developing countries were forced by the existing economic and political realities to adapt their national strategies to the neoliberal dynamic of unrestricted economic growth.

Political support for the environment, and for its main international institution, plummeted.⁸² In the United States, the 1994 “Gingrich revolution” during President Bill Clinton’s first term in office resulted in the takeover of both houses of Congress by Republicans.⁸³ The new legislators were skeptical and even hostile to multilateral institutions and the environment, and as a result the United States stopped contributing to the United Nations and all of its agencies and programmes.⁸⁴ Contributions to UNEP diminished from an all-time high of \$21 million in both 1993 and 1994 (or \$37 million when adjusted for inflation) to \$5.5 million in 1997 (equivalent to \$8.7 million), a more than 76 percent drop (in real terms). “The requests from the Clinton administration remained at or near 1993–94 levels through the remainder of their term in office,” explained John Matuszak, international affairs officer at the US State Department, “but they were never approved by Congress.”⁸⁵

The vacuum left by the United States could not be filled by other states.⁸⁶ Europe was struggling with the dual impacts of the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Wars. Countries in the former Soviet Bloc stopped contributing because of the economic and political crises they were experiencing. Larger Western European countries also diminished their support. France, for example, slashed its contribution by 75 percent, from the \$2 million it had contributed annually from 1990 to 1994 to less than \$500,000 in 1995, and it failed to contribute at all in 1996. Smaller European countries, on the other hand, stepped in and increased their support. Denmark’s contribution increased in the 1990s—from \$575,000 in 1990 to \$2.4 million in 1998—as did that of the Netherlands, from \$790,000 to \$2 million in that period. The 1990s, therefore, were very challenging for UNEP financially and politically.

Without strong support from developed countries, UNEP found itself confined to a narrow interpretation of its mandate and limited in action by its funding.⁸⁷

Overall, contributions to the Environment Fund plunged more than 30 percent in less than five years—from close to \$130 million in 1992–1993 to \$90 million in 1996–1997. The precarious financial situation exerted significant pressure on UNEP’s leadership and management. At the same time, a survey of environmental financing available in UN entities showed the enormous disparities in the system. In the mid-1990s, expenditures for environmental projects within the International Labour Organization were \$50 million per year, at the Food and Agriculture Organization \$51.3 million, and at UNDP \$170 million.⁸⁸ Ultimately, the expansion of the number of institutions with environmental portfolios and the reduction of UNEP’s resources substantially eroded the organization’s central role in global environmental governance.

The difficult financial situation led to program adjustments and staff reductions, propelling UNEP into what some analysts call a “doom loop.” The result was stagnation, irrelevance, and a consensus that “UNEP was adrift.”⁸⁹ These problems made the task of the new executive director very demanding. The need to reinvent the organization in the new geopolitical and institutional landscape led to an inward-looking period that lasted until mid-1998.

ROOTS OF REFORM

In the 1990s, there was a real mismatch between the kind of institution that UNEP was and the kind of institution it wanted to be. Mostafa Tolba had pursued a broad normative agenda of environmental law and institutions but had also developed many ways to engage directly on the ground. Having agreed to sustainable development as the overarching goal, developing countries increasingly demanded that UNEP actively support concrete projects within their jurisdictions. Developed countries resisted these demands and argued that UNEP’s normative mandate precluded such involvement.

Dowdeswell wanted UNEP to evolve toward broad scientific policy and away from local projects, and she went on record supporting UNEP’s

withdrawal from implementing fieldwork projects at the local and national levels—a principal legacy of Mostafa Tolba that included work in developing countries on drinking water purification, soil conservation, and pest control.⁹⁰ This institutional metamorphosis was a direct challenge to the interests of the G-77, and dissatisfaction with UNEP grew, setting the stage for the beginning of reform efforts.⁹¹

During the nineteenth session of the Governing Council, which met in January and February 1997, the G-77 formally objected to the programmatic and budgetary shift away from local projects. In response, Dowdeswell urged the Governing Council to support “deep and far-reaching organizational reform” that would entail “examination of the role and focus of UNEP, and also of its governance, and the provision of a sound and adequate financial base.”⁹² Governments, however, could not agree on the creation of a high-level committee for policy guidance to UNEP and suspended the session on its last day. After subsequent meetings in Geneva, delegates reconvened in Nairobi in March. One of the most notable outcomes of the session was the 1997 Nairobi Declaration on the Role and Mandate of UNEP, which confirmed UNEP’s role as the leading environmental authority and its ambitious mandate in science, policy, and support. The mandate to be the leading authority, however, did not provide UNEP with any explicit authority over the environmental conventions and their secretariats nor with any capacity to hold secretariats or UN entities accountable. This paper-tiger mandate has been a challenge. In 1997, the UN Office for Internal Oversight Services carried out an evaluation and identified UNEP’s core problem: “The basic issue facing UNEP is the clarification of its role,” the report concluded, “It is not clear to staff or to stakeholders what that role should be. The lack of clarity has had consequences for ... staff morale and esprit de corps.” The recommendation was to focus on fewer priorities and increase UNEP’s effectiveness and impact.⁹³ This identity challenge has persisted and continues to be a major obstacle to effectiveness and impact.

Ultimately, despite all the difficulties within and outside the organization, Elizabeth Dowdeswell was deeply committed to making a difference. During her tenure at UNEP, she sought to bring about positive operational, cultural, and environmental change. She created new programs in areas where the organization had not been active, including a

vibrant trade and environment program, and in spite of opposition and sexism became a prominent player in this field.⁹⁴ Yet, despite the process of rethinking that Dowdeswell initiated, the role of UNEP remained contested, its value added misunderstood.⁹⁵ Notwithstanding the challenges and open resistance she faced, progress was made during the final phase of Dowdeswell's tenure that enabled UNEP to emerge with a new sense of purpose.⁹⁶

KLAUS TÖPFER (1998–2006)

In 1998, Dr. Klaus Töpfer, former German environment minister and one of the key negotiators at the Rio Earth Summit, was appointed executive director of UNEP. Kofi Annan had assumed the office of UN Secretary-General the previous year and had launched an effort aimed at comprehensive UN reform. Environment emerged as a critical concern. "Of all the challenges facing the world community in the next century," Annan stated in the 1998 Secretary-General's report on *Environment and Human Settlements*, "none will be more formidable or pervasive as the attainment of a sustainable equilibrium between economic growth, poverty reduction, social equity and the protection of the Earth's resources, common and life-support systems."⁹⁷ Annan appointed Klaus Töpfer as the leader of a new Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements. This meant that Töpfer had a leadership position in the UN system from the start of his term. With experience as an academic, a government official, and a minister, Töpfer commanded respect from UNEP's core constituency, the world's environment ministers,⁹⁸ who saw him as "both a committed 'green' and a pragmatic manager."⁹⁹ During his two terms, Töpfer stabilized UNEP and expanded its operations.

CONSUMMATE POLITICIAN

Having served as a politician, a minister of both planning and environment in a prominent country, and a university professor, Töpfer had deep knowledge of the issues and the system. He also knew what was going on in UNEP as he had led the German delegation to the UNEP Governing Council, participated in the annual informal ministerial consultations,

and served as a contributor and leader in the Rio Earth Summit. As Mostafa Tolba remarked, "He knew what was there before he came, and that is why we were all putting our eggs in his basket."¹⁰⁰

Töpfer's entrepreneurial leadership was externally focused and politically driven. He had high personal political ambitions and saw UNEP as a stepping stone to becoming EU Commissioner of Environment or President of Germany. This ambition was evident from the start, and throughout his two terms as executive director he retained his links to the European political scene. Staff members noted that Töpfer was very attentive to EU priorities and to German concerns and "always kept a foot in his old pond while fishing in UNEP's."¹⁰¹ A consummate politician, Töpfer saw the environment as political. "Whether or not solutions are effectively applied will continue to rely upon politics and policy," he wrote in 1998, "upon the aptitude of leaders, parties and their constituents and upon a complex cross-referencing and cooperative system involving international agencies, national environmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international conventions and agreements."¹⁰² In this political context, member states were UNEP's primary constituency that demanded close attention, and civil society was an important ally.

As minister of planning in Germany, Töpfer had presided over the move of the German capital from Bonn to Berlin in the mid-1990s. When he was appointed as UNEP's executive director in 1998, many thought that he would be "a Trojan Horse" for the relocation of UNEP to Bonn under the guise of transforming UNEP into a specialized agency, a UN (or World) Environment Organization.¹⁰³ Instead, Töpfer became an ardent supporter of UNEP's location in Kenya and reaffirmed it in nearly every speech to the international community. His intellectual leadership instigated a change in narrative at UNEP, moving the organization toward a more central role in sustainable development. He advocated for integrating social and economic concerns with the ecological and cultural dimensions of the natural and built environment. "When I went to Kenya eight years ago as German minister for the environment," he told the German Council for Sustainable Development in 2005, "it was not only my English that was miserable. My understanding of the problem was also miserable. My understanding of the problem was much more focused on environmental policy. Today,

I am firmly convinced that the environment is vital to development.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Töpfer focused on this new narrative, articulated the positive relationship between environment and development, and promoted a UNEP motto “Environment for Development.”

Töpfer’s vision for UNEP was to engage in any effort that had political momentum and value. He sought to create institutional mechanisms to engage constituencies and secure their support. As chair of the Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements in 1998, he led an analytical and political process that set out a vision for reforming UNEP that, when completed years later, led to reform of UNEP’s governance structure, as chapter 7 explains.

FUNDAMENTAL RESTRUCTURING

From the outset of his term in office, Töpfer acknowledged UNEP’s achievements in science, law, and policy but noted that the work had taken a sectoral or issue-based approach. Recognizing that the Rio Earth Summit demanded a more integrative approach, he created a fundamentally different organizational structure. UNEP had been organized around particular issues with Program Activity Centers. Töpfer moved to a focus on functions—environmental assessment and early warning, development of policy instruments, enhanced coordination with environmental conventions, technology transfer and industry, and support to Africa—and created divisions within each of these topics.¹⁰⁵ The expectation was that the new organizational structure would result in greater coordination and clarification of the lines of authority and responsibility within the organization. Töpfer envisioned that specific sectoral issues such as water, air, and ecosystems would be dealt with in every division. He also addressed new areas such as conflict and environment, for example, and created the post-conflict assessment branch, which governments have relied on for a number of assessments and advice in conflict situations.

Achieving a coordinated, concerted approach within the organization underscored the need for communication, information exchange, and an overarching strategy, areas in which UNEP had been struggling. Divisions, however, operated as silos and lacked organizational unity. This alienation was even more pronounced at the outpost offices at the regional

and country level, where employees identified as professionals working on a concrete issue rather than as UNEP staff.¹⁰⁶ Under the new structure, it was not uncommon for various divisions to focus on different life-cycle periods of the same issue—for example, assessment of water pollution, policy development, policy implementation, and communication on water pollution actions—which meant that groups that were fundamentally working on the same issue were competing for scarce resources and attention. This resulted in ad hoc financial requests from divisions and a perception of competition within the organization. A major shift in organizational culture was necessary to improve communication and collaboration, but management challenges and the prolonged absences of the executive director from Nairobi led to continuous struggles to articulate UNEP's role and identity.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY AND INSTABILITY

Klaus Töpfer had to dramatically elevate UNEP's diminished visibility and increase its financial resources at a time when the organization was financially weakened, institutionally diffuse, and politically marginalized. In the late 1990s, the world was in the grips of a financial crisis that had spread from Thailand through the rest of the world and challenged the "Asian Miracle" narrative. Financial and political commitments undertaken at Rio remained unfulfilled. The North had not even come close to its 0.7 percent of GDP target for financial assistance it had committed to in 1970.¹⁰⁷ Little progress had been made on resolving global environmental concerns and both the Global North and South had failed to implement their environmental agreements to safeguard biodiversity, reverse desertification, reduce pollution, deal with persistent organic pollutants and hazardous waste, or address climate change. Governments' attention had moved away from the environment into sustainable development, a neoliberal ideology had taken root, and the institutional landscape had become even more crowded. This required the new executive director to invest a great deal of time and effort into mobilizing political support from governments.

As a former minister in the European Union, Töpfer knew how to engage with donors. He was supportive of the notion of "upgrading" UNEP into

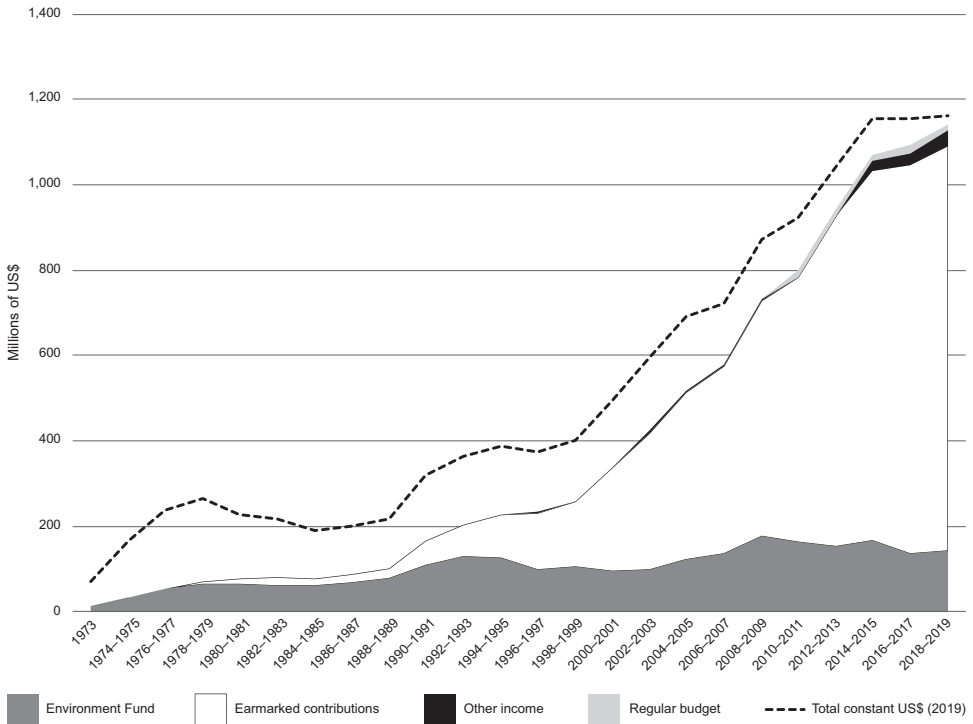
a specialized agency.¹⁰⁸ Driven to gain political stature, increase UNEP's exposure, and affirm its leadership role on the global environmental stage, Töpfer was quick to start new initiatives, mobilize attention, and raise funding. "So, when there was a tsunami in the world," Mark Halle remarked, "Töpfer was worried about how you deal with victims and UNEP dropped everything they were doing and shifted over to running and setting up a tsunami program." In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami in 2003, for example, Töpfer created the Asian Tsunami Disaster Task Force to assist governments in assessing and responding to the environmental impacts of the tsunami. UNEP deployed experts to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Maldives, the Seychelles, and Yemen to engage in operational work.¹⁰⁹ Töpfer created new partnerships and new UNEP centers around the world, which increased UNEP's presence in the field but also scattered focus and attention and detracted from its normative mandate.¹¹⁰

Töpfer also sought out opportunities to speak about the work of the institution. He received an increasing number of requests to address member states, and as a result, UNEP became more visible. Projecting a positive picture of UNEP was to lead to increased donor confidence and resources, and in its communications and programming, UNEP focused almost entirely on successes and avoided ineffective initiatives or lessons learned. This strategy resulted in the expected positive perception, but it also contributed to an organizational culture with strong aversion to criticism. The negative consequence, a staff member noted, was that UNEP was "permeated by fear of being criticized and is not adult enough to deal with criticism."¹¹¹

Overall, the executive director succeeded in achieving his financial goals. UNEP's finances increased from close to \$260 million in the 1998–1999 biennium (\$401 million when adjusted for inflation) when Töpfer took office to about \$580 million in 2006–2007 (\$723 million when adjusted for inflation) when he left, representing an increase of 80 percent when adjusted for inflation (see figure 6.4). This growth was due exclusively to an increase in extrabudgetary resources. During Töpfer's term, income from those sources more than doubled, from \$153.7 million in 1998–1999 (\$247.5 million when adjusted for inflation) to \$394.3 million in 2004–2005 (\$524.4 million when adjusted for inflation). During his eight years in office, Töpfer created fifty-nine new trust funds,

more than any other executive director in UNEP's history.¹¹² The “ear-mark craziness,”¹¹³ former Assistant Executive Director Anthony Brough remarked, has reshaped UNEP's financing over time, and such funds now constitute over 80 percent of UNEP's income.¹¹⁴ The Environment Fund stayed relatively constant but at a very low level. During Töpfer's two terms, UNEP's average annual income from the Environment Fund adjusted for inflation was at \$76 million, lower than all except for Erik Solheim's term (\$72 million; see figures 6.2 and 6.4).

The move away from core funding to earmarked contributions led to an increase in revenues, a large number of funds, and consequently, to a proliferation of projects. While the additional resources are necessary and welcome, the growing number of new funds also drained staff members' time and effort and diminished UNEP's independence and flexibility. The incessant need to secure new resources led to a vicious circle reinforcing the importance of extrabudgetary resources.



6.4 UNEP income from 1973 to 2019 by category.

THE TRAVEL TRAP

Töpfer's top priority was to regain the support of important contributors and improve UNEP's financial health. To increase visibility and bolster funding, he engaged with many countries, in many issues, at many sites. "If that meant frequent absences from Nairobi and hard political graft in national capitals," Stanley Johnson wrote in 2012 after interviewing Klaus Töpfer on the occasion of UNEP's fortieth anniversary, "then that—in Töpfer's view—was a price that had to be paid."¹¹⁵ Indeed, Töpfer came to be known as "one of the top ten people who travel most around the world," a distinction he acknowledged with some pride.¹¹⁶ "When I first came to Nairobi," he recalled, "they told me this joke about Dr. Tolba. 'What is the difference between Dr. Tolba and God the Father?' And the answer? 'God the Father is everywhere. Dr. Tolba is everywhere except Nairobi!' Well, now you can cross out Tolba and put Töpfer there instead."¹¹⁷ The prolonged absences of the executive director from the Nairobi headquarters, however, affected UNEP's management and operations, and the morale of the staff.

Because of his frequent absences, the executive director had not built effective governance and management systems that could cover operations while he was away, and such a system was even more necessary because of his extensive absence. Without robust systems, the vacuum of internal leadership slowed down the organization and angered staff. "No one minds the store when Töpfer is not in Nairobi"¹¹⁸ and "no one is allowed to make decisions while he is away,"¹¹⁹ staff members explained. Töpfer had to approve any activity, no matter how minor, staff remarked, stating that the executive director personally approved or rejected any trip over twenty kilometers.¹²⁰ As a result, in the frequent absence of the executive director, UNEP could not take a stance on controversial issues; hobbled by delays, the organization struggled.¹²¹ Indeed, Töpfer traveled so extensively that he had not rented a permanent residence in Nairobi and stayed in hotels whenever he was in Nairobi during his first term. "So, the staff actually rose up in arms," one government official remarked, "and said: 'If we're going to have a director, he'd better have a house in Nairobi.' So, he actually got an apartment, but he never really used it. And that was a big part of the bad management."¹²² Ultimately, however, the executive director could not have increased UNEP's authority

and financing without being able to connect directly with governments around the world, which did require extensive travel.

REGAINED VISIBILITY

Töpfer's political savvy and competence were critical to making UNEP more recognizable, more visible, and a more sought-after partner. In emphasizing the environment as the foundation for development, Töpfer advanced the eco-development ideas that Maurice Strong and Mostafa Tolba had articulated. He did not focus on engaging in international environmental lawmaking in the way that UNEP had done in the early years but extended the work that Liz Dowdeswell had begun after the Rio Earth Summit by bringing the environmental dimension into the mainstream of the development debate. Töpfer took advantage of the broader operating space that the 1997 Nairobi Declaration had provided and engaged governments more intensively than any previous executive director. The Töpfer Task Force also produced an ambitious and widely accepted report on environment and human settlements with twenty-four recommendations for reforming and creating structures, rules, institutions, political processes, relations, and systems. The report recommended, for example, the creation of a Global Ministerial Environment Forum, a platform for the world's environment ministers to convene both in Nairobi and in countries around the world in a special session in alternate years; the establishment of the Environment Management Group, a problem-solving, results-oriented interagency mechanism to achieve effective coordination and joint action on key environmental and human-settlement issues throughout the UN system; and the reform of the membership of the UNEP Governing Council from limited to universal, i.e., in line with the UN General Assembly. These recommendations would appear in the reports of multiple intergovernmental groups working on international environmental governance and would be enacted over the following years as part of UNEP's reform process.

In May 2000, UNEP convened the first Global Ministerial Environmental Forum in Malmö, Sweden. Over one hundred ministers gathered along with more than five hundred delegates from over 130 countries and adopted the Malmö Ministerial Declaration. The Declaration recognized the challenge of the increasing number of international environmental

agreements and their implementation, called for reinvigorated international cooperation and solidarity, and urged a closer partnership with civil society and the private sector, issues that would resurface regularly as priorities over the years.¹²³ The Declaration sounded the same alarm bells that had rung in the UN Millennium Survey, in which 57,000 adults from sixty countries had responded that they thought their governments had not done enough to protect their environment.¹²⁴ Töpfer was positioning UNEP to play a leadership role in the planning for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa.¹²⁵

Töpfer led UNEP through the 2002 Cartagena process on reforming international environmental governance, which moved the reform agenda forward. He established central functions in Nairobi while also strengthening UNEP's presence in Geneva and New York.¹²⁶ The reform process would ultimately result in important changes to UNEP's governance structures (many of which were articulated in the 1998 Töpfer Task Force report) years after Dr. Klaus Töpfer had left office and under the leadership of UNEP's subsequent Executive Director, Achim Steiner.

ACHIM STEINER (2006–2016)

In September 2005, at the High-level Plenary Meeting of the sixtieth session of the UN General Assembly, Achim Steiner, representing civil society as Director General of IUCN, addressed member states. "In order to make poverty history," he stated, "we need to make environment the future."¹²⁷ Less than a year later, in June 2006, Steiner was appointed to the position of executive director of UNEP with the explicit mandate to catalyze and promote international cooperation and action to safeguard the environment. On his first day as UNEP's executive director, Steiner reiterated his commitment to connecting poverty and ecosystem vitality, saying, "For too long economics and environment have seemed like players on rival teams. There have been a lot of nasty challenges and far too many own goals. We need to make these two sides of the development coin team players, players on the same side."¹²⁸ He thus picked up the theme that all UNEP executive directors had been working on since the organization's inception: bringing environment and development into a coherent framework. Steiner served two four-year terms with one two-year extension to see through the governance reforms.

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

Steiner had the competency and tact to operate in the international community in a politically savvy fashion similar to that of Klaus Töpfer, but he was bolder, more articulate, and more ambitious in undertaking substantive work. Born and raised in Brazil to a German farmer, Steiner enjoyed extraordinary legitimacy among developing countries because of his stance on addressing environment and development as connected challenges, his experience and knowledge of different cultures and development contexts across four continents, and because of the understanding and empathy he exhibited. "I wanted to assist in realizing a far more focused and responsive institution," he noted, "so that when governments request action, the system is already aligned to deliver."¹²⁹ He approached issues with a positive attitude and engaged with potential partners with new ideas, solutions, and initiatives.

He projected a sense that his was a fresh approach and was able to convince others that this genuinely was a new start for UNEP. His political and diplomatic skills made him, and thus UNEP, relevant, and often critical, to the positive outcomes of many high-level, high-stakes discussions. He succeeded in making governments feel comfortable with him and in engaging productively with the governing bodies. As Ambassador Julia Pataki, Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives from 2014 to 2016, remarked, Steiner "had it all. He could discuss everything in a holistic manner, had good political sense, related well to people, and was accessible."¹³⁰ As an intellectual leader, Steiner brought to UNEP a clear appreciation for the need to embed environmental policy into the political economy of society, to treat nature as capital, and to integrate the value of ecosystem services into national policy.¹³¹ Upon taking office, he committed to work on ensuring that markets and international treaties could support environmental and social goals. In addition, Steiner successfully engaged governments and the private sector.

INTEGRATIVE VISION

For Steiner, the environment was more than just one of the three pillars of sustainable development (along with the economy and social issues), as the 1992 Rio Earth Summit had emphasized; instead, the environment was the foundation for all life on Earth. "The natural services provided

by the land, the air, the biodiversity, and the world's waters have been frequently treated as free and limitless," Steiner declared. "While money may make the world go round," he said, "what makes money go round is ultimately the trillions of dollars generated by the planet's goods and services from the air cleaning and climate change countering processes of forests to the fisheries and the coastline protection power of coral reefs."¹³² Steiner's priority, therefore, was to decouple economic growth from resource use and demonstrate that environmental protection is fundamental to a stable society and economy. His conviction shifted the prevailing narrative away from the "three-pillars" approach of Rio.¹³³ The green economy and green finance became landmark initiatives of Steiner's tenure.

Articulating a compelling vision was one of Steiner's core strengths. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted in our interview, Steiner is "very passionate and very eloquent and has deep knowledge."¹³⁴ He could work successfully with a range of actors and convince them to support his vision and his efforts. Steiner saw UNEP as "an ever-brighter beacon of intellectual leadership, scientific assessment, and an energetic catalyst for the deep and meaningful policy reforms and revolutions so urgently needed worldwide."¹³⁵ To this end, he set out to make the organization efficient and effective by introducing results-based management and focusing on a few key priority initiatives, including the Design of a Sustainable Financial System, The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), and the Portfolio Decarbonization Coalition, among others. He also introduced a Medium-Term Strategy to help measure the organization's performance. The strategy provides the vision and direction for all UNEP activities for three-year periods through cross-cutting thematic priorities. The goal was to enable UNEP to deliver on its mandate by creating a framework for focused, effective, and efficient delivery of results; and for transparent monitoring and evaluation of performance.¹³⁶

MANAGEMENT CONTESTATION

At the outset, Steiner improved staff morale. People felt a new sense of hope because he believed in UNEP and was able to communicate his passion. Initially, there was also hope that Steiner would help heal rifts

within the organization and foster discipline and self-motivation among staff. Similar to other bureaucracies, however, the internal workings of UNEP have remained rather inscrutable. And while reform of UNEP's internal structure was necessary, this required a range of difficult actions that Steiner was not able to push through.

As had every executive director before him, Steiner reorganized UNEP's internal structure. He sought to return to the issue-focused approach of Tolba's period, but without changing the functional approach and divisional structure that Töpfer had created. The result was a complex organization—a matrix structure that staff consistently characterized as burdensome and ineffectual. As one staff member noted, “During Steiner's time all divisions were doing everything, each was a mini UNEP.”¹³⁷ Another challenge was the increased emphasis on projects as the delivery mechanism for achievement of the program of work. In this system, the cycle for projects is two years, and at the end of every project staff may be dismissed. This put considerable pressure on staff to constantly justify their employment, which was compounded by the pressure to attract funding and to ensure that new projects were in the pipeline. The need to manage and deliver on projects while having to raise funds to maintain staff levels creates a stressful work environment: “One-year contracts keep staff in suspense and create fear and a culture of not speaking up,” a staff member reflected.¹³⁸ In essence, this meant that UNEP was managed on a personal level. “Jobs are promised, recruitment is pro forma, and there is retaliation through contract extension,” they lamented.¹³⁹ Some of these issues are part of the larger UN system and not unique to UNEP, and they certainly present challenges to every executive director. How that leader handles these problems can be telling.

“There was no better communicator than Steiner,” Idunn Eidheim of the Norwegian Environment Ministry remarked, “but he traveled a lot and was not able to delegate enough responsibility. The executive director should be able to speak for the organization, and communication skills are critical, but a skilled administrator is also crucial.”¹⁴⁰ Steiner's management philosophy was that a good manager could manage anything, and he focused on hiring people with management expertise rather than trying to find potential managers with issue expertise among UNEP staff. Steiner would not recognize mistakes he had made in appointments,

however, and would “stick with them far beyond the time it became clear they were not working at all,” Mark Halle remarked.¹⁴¹ Staff commented that Steiner’s management style was very hierarchical, that he managed the organization through a shadow cabinet, and that he relied on a small network of close friends and associates, which alienated many competent staff who felt excluded and ignored. Steiner had assembled a senior leadership team of a few top-echelon staffers—the directors of the divisions, the deputy director, the head of the New York office, and the chief of the executive office—and convened over 250 meetings of that team. He took time to discuss and deliberate, but avoided making tough decisions, and UNEP remained top-down.¹⁴²

The challenges with management at UNEP have been essential for every executive director. Steiner sought to introduce results-based management, but “an intergovernmental institution such as the UN does not lend itself to quick fixes and easy change,” he told the Governing Council in 2010.¹⁴³ Communications, data and analysis for strategic management, human resources, and capacity and skills development remained critical concerns and an obstacle to timely and effective delivery. Significant reform, however, requires bold decisions and upsetting the status quo, a difficult proposition to deliver on. The two directors who openly challenged the status quo—Elizabeth Dowdeswell and Erik Solheim—only served one term and half a term, respectively.

TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTION AND FINANCIAL EXPANSION

Steiner’s term at UNEP was defined by technological advances the likes of which had not been seen in generations, including remarkable progress in communication capacity, which led to an increase in transparency. At the same time, member states were demanding management reform and a move to a more results-based organization. “When I arrived,” Steiner remarked, “a lot of the governments were saying ‘okay, we know why we have UNEP, but can it be re-tuned so that it delivers far more in very practical terms?’”¹⁴⁴ Recognizing the importance of working with other UN organizations, Steiner put a lot of energy into building stronger ties with them. “The challenges are so immense that, only by working together in mutual self-interest, can we realize internationally agreed goals and

deliver a stable, just and healthy planet for this and future generations,” he noted.¹⁴⁵ Accordingly, Steiner improved UNEP’s relations with other UN bodies, especially with UNDP and the World Bank. Though challenges in delivering the desired results persisted, his strategy was to refocus and revive UNEP, and create an understanding of UNEP as the environment programme of the UN. As a result, UNEP gained attention and prominence in the UN system.¹⁴⁶

Steiner also managed to elevate the standing of UNEP’s New York office in the UN system by raising the status of its director from a D1 (director) post to an Assistant Secretary-General, one of two UNEP staff (the other being the Deputy Director) at that level. This effectively signaled that it was a leadership position, not just a high-level management job.¹⁴⁷ In the political system of the United Nations, such status is critical, as former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted in our interview.¹⁴⁸ Every UN member state is represented in New York by a permanent representative with the status of an Ambassador. Ambassadors are reluctant to meet with counterparts if they don’t hold equally high positions and would often avoid or refuse to interact directly with the director of UNEP’s New York office while that position was at the D1 level. An Assistant Secretary-General commands respect and attracts attention.

Steiner continued on the trajectory set by Klaus Töpfer in improving UNEP’s financial health. Contributions increased from the very start of his term in office and continued to rise. During his term (2006–2016), the total income of the organization per biennium almost doubled from \$580 million in 2006–2007 to over \$1 billion in 2015–2016. The Environment Fund stayed constant during that period at \$91 million per year, while earmarked contributions and trust funds increased by over 90 percent. The increase in overall finances came from extrabudgetary funds that imposed restrictions on how the money could be spent and inserted an additional level of oversight; however, this stream also allowed for entrepreneurship by the executive director in reaching out for support of various initiatives that would be of interest to partners. Steiner thus continued the trend that had taken off under Töpfer’s leadership and brought in substantively higher annual amounts of financial contributions over his ten years in office when compared to other UNEP executive directors (see figure 6.2).

REGAINED AUTHORITY

Steiner's proactive attitude improved UNEP's reputation and helped increase its authority among governments and within the UN system. The integrated approach to environment, society, and development encouraged developing countries to step up and assist with solutions, even though they were not responsible for causing many of the problems that were being addressed. Developing countries argued that they did not cause climate change but nevertheless agreed to be part of the solution. They also came to take responsibility for helping to solve the problems of endangered species and deforestation, and restated the importance of land and culture, advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples and the rights of mother earth.¹⁴⁹

Steiner walked the talk on sustainability and led a far-reaching physical transformation. When he took office, he declared that he was "fully committed to ensuring that UNEP's headquarters becomes ever more a world-class facility, on par with cities like New York or Geneva," because, he explained, "Africa and the developing world deserve nothing less."¹⁵⁰ He delivered on that promise a few years later, in 2011, when the new Nairobi headquarters for UNEP and UN-Habitat opened its doors. Featuring energy-efficient lighting, natural ventilation systems, rain harvesting, and gardens with hardy indigenous plants, this eco-building set a new standard for sustainability in buildings. It has six thousand square meters of solar panels—the largest installation on a roof in East Africa at the time—that generate all the electricity necessary for the 1,200 building occupants. In its first year of operation, the solar-powered building saved at least 650,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity and up to 1.4 million shillings (about \$14,000) in electricity bills compared to a standard building of the same size. It also supports employee well-being with a pleasant work environment that highlights greenery and natural light. "It's a brilliant building to work in; the light around our office space is wonderful and it's nice not to hear the sound of generators and to have everything running efficiently," one staff member noted, adding that it was a building of the future (see figure 5.4).¹⁵¹

Steiner's ambitions for UNEP were driven by his aspiration to bring countries together and advance a shared agenda. During his ten-year tenure, he obtained political support, increased financial resources significantly,

and sought to align UNEP and the UN system to advance environmental priorities. He worked to make environment ministers more effective in their own national debates and in their own countries by building connections beyond their offices. He also moved the dialogue beyond governments and engaged civil society and the private sector, which increased UNEP's recognition and influence on the international stage to a level comparable to that of the Tolba era. In 2016, after leaving UNEP, Steiner joined the Martin School at Oxford University, but only a few months later, in 2017, he became the Administrator of UNDP, a major competitor and collaborator for UNEP.

ERIK SOLHEIM (2016–2018)

Erik Solheim became executive director of UNEP “at a critical point in UN efforts to tackle global warming, green finance flows and protect diminishing stocks of endangered flora and fauna,” environmental news outlets noted at the time of his appointment in 2016.¹⁵² He came into an organization on the rise, actively seeking to assert its place as the global authority on the environment. Having served as environment and development minister in Norway, Solheim had a plan for the organization. A risk-taker by nature, he came in with a new management style. He focused on the outside world and set out to create a new narrative; engaged with new constituencies, China and India in particular; and sought to restructure the administrative systems.¹⁵³ Solheim found the UN bureaucratic and stifling and was defiant in his disregard for rules that he found antiquated and wanted to change. Dissatisfaction with his management style spurred an audit report by the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services of official travel at UNEP. The investigation resulted in negative press, the critical findings led to the freezing of funds by some member states, and Solheim's reform plans were halted.¹⁵⁴ “I trusted the strong marching orders for reform of the UN we were given by the UN Secretary-General and was absolutely confident he would support reformers,” Solheim remarked in our 2020 interview. “I didn't realize it was all reform talk, not reforms.”¹⁵⁵ Less than two years into the job, in November 2018, Solheim resigned from UNEP at the request of UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Solheim came into UNEP with a clear plan to connect with people so that they can act and encourage their governments to act, but he lost his leadership position amid the controversy that ensued. His foremost priority was to change the conversation in order to inspire and empower people to protect their environment. His conviction was that environmental progress would only happen if people demand change, politicians regulate markets and stay consistent, and the private sector engages fully. “Our challenge is that we need to bring people on board, and to do this we need to stop talking in acronyms and speak a language that people understand,” he said in our interview in 2017.¹⁵⁶ He laid out a vision for UNEP as people-centered, politically engaged, simple, and decentralized. He saw UNEP’s role as “a moral voice” and a forum for interaction and action.

Perhaps Solheim’s most visible reform effort was the sudden renaming of UNEP to UN Environment. Acronyms had beleaguered the organization’s public narrative for decades; they fostered the perception that the UN was an anonymous, opaque institution. Solheim set out to rectify that by changing the name and making language simpler and more understandable to the broader public. The executive director cannot unilaterally change the official name of the intergovernmental institution, but they can initiate an informal change that, over time, can become normal practice. In UNEP’s case, however, the change resulted in further confusion about purpose and identity.

Three months after assuming office, Solheim announced to his staff that they should refer to the organization as UN Environment. “UN Environment requires us to breathe a nanosecond longer and to spend longer time at the computer. The reward is that everyone on the planet understands what it is about,” he wrote in a memo to all staff. The change was envisioned to be internal, but it soon led to change of the logo; the website URL was changed to <https://unenvironment.org>, and staff began referring to UNEP as UN Environment. Becoming UN Environment did not entail any change of the legal structure but resulted in needless expense of political capital because UNEP had been at a similar point before. In the 1990s and 2000s, the international environmental governance reform process instigated heated analytical and political debates on whether

UNEP should become a World Environment Organization or a UN Environment Organization. A change in name, therefore, was automatically associated with the potential for other, more substantial changes—in function, form, financing, and perhaps location. As Mohamed El-Ashry, the founder and first CEO of the Global Environment Facility, exclaimed, “Calling it UN Environment brings us back again to focusing on names and not focusing on functions and outcomes.”¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, governments reacted strongly against the change because they had not been consulted. “Any changes to the nomenclature, mandate or nature of the Programme should follow the same process as in the General Assembly of the United Nations and be conducted in an open, transparent and inclusive manner,” the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment stated in 2017.¹⁵⁸ Solheim’s failure to observe legal rules and procedures inflamed controversy and confusion about the name change. In essence, the institution was challenging its own identity again.

A name is the baseline of an organization’s identity, and Solheim felt that changing it was a necessary first step to forging a new image of the organization, despite his legal team’s advice to the contrary. Solheim’s vision was essentially the original vision of the governments that created UNEP in 1972: an entity to serve as the anchor institution for the environment in the UN system. But the organization had operated within the UN system for over four decades, and transformation could not happen overnight. “Erik Solheim was fresh and different but did not understand the nature of the team he was playing in,” Mark Halle remarked. “You cannot play rugby at Wimbledon. UNEP is part of the system.”¹⁵⁹ The result was increased confusion about identity, and despite the change in branding and websites, there was no consistent use of names. United Nations Environment Programme, UN Environment Programme, UNEP, and UN Environment were all used, and observers even began to say UNE as an acronym for UN Environment, which defeated the very purpose of the name change. Executive Director Inger Andersen, who took office in 2019, reverted back to the original UN Environment Programme and UNEP, but UN Environment remains sprinkled throughout the website. An important legacy of Solheim’s initiative to change the language is the new nomenclature for UNEP’s core building blocks, the divisions: DELC (Division of Environmental Law and Conventions), DTIE (Division of

Trade, Industry and Environment), and DCPI (Division of Communication and Public Information) became the Law Division, the Economics Division, and the Communication Division, respectively.¹⁶⁰ And these titles are here to stay.

ERRATIC MANAGEMENT

When UN Secretary-General António Guterres took office in 2017, he demanded that all UN agencies transform into more modern, transparent, and open institutions and engage actively in frank debates and discussions. “Nothing will make me deviate from that mission,” Solheim wrote to UNEP staff in March 2018. “We need to be much more political and concrete. We shall focus on people, impact and changing behaviours. We will turn ourselves outwardly, adjust past practices, simplify and decentralize our internal processes, communicate better.”¹⁶¹ Solheim urged staff to embrace reform and not be afraid that change within the institution might eliminate jobs. “It is exactly the opposite,” he told staff during a town hall meeting in March 2018. “Without reforms, our budget will shrink, and there is no way to keep the staff. The way to increase our budget is to do reforms.”¹⁶² Restructuring of the organization was thus in order.

Internally, Solheim restructured the executive director’s office with the goal of improving management but noted that he considered organizational culture more important than structure.¹⁶³ “The culture of innovation, the culture of debate, the culture of coming up with new ideas and new solutions, is much more important than the exact way it’s structured,” he remarked. UNEP, however, has struggled with its organizational culture, as it has been very hierarchical and often managed through fear rather than motivation.¹⁶⁴ Debate and innovation are contingent upon effective management, which has been a weakness of many of the executive directors. Solheim also acknowledged that he had used all of his energy on projects out of the office, and spent too little time on administration.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, his erratic management style created dysfunction. He “brought in or elevated his own people,” former UNEP staff member Oli Brown wrote, “who wielded tremendous power over budgets, jobs and opportunities in what soon turned into a ‘game of thrones’ saga of individual

power games, patronage and fiefdoms.”¹⁶⁶ As media coverage explained, some senior staff members were allowed to break the rules and received better benefits. His chief of staff, for example, continued to be based in Paris, her hometown, rather than moving to Nairobi. Staff perceived Solheim’s management style as one of preferential treatment, which generated resentment. Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* reported that those who criticized Solheim were often told they were too bureaucratic and difficult, while those close to him “felt they could do as they liked.”¹⁶⁷

Externally, Solheim recognized the imperative for partnership. “UN Environment is a small organisation when you think that we are working for the entire planet,” he noted. “So, everything we want to achieve will require partnerships—with governments, business or citizens.”¹⁶⁸ His priority was to engage UNEP with China and India and to work much more closely with business, a strategy which required extensive travel. Solheim firmly believed that working with the private sector was common sense and that UNEP needed to be present in that space—though some observers cautioned that engaging business should not come at the expense of engagement with governments. Others warned that financial support from China might have led to Solheim’s unconditional praise for China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure project, which “set alarm bells ringing in capitals around the world.”¹⁶⁹ Solheim disagreed with the US criticism that China was using UNEP to greenwash its vast and environmentally impactful infrastructure undertaking, and he noted that countries other than those in North America and Europe could also lead the way in global infrastructure development. He thus challenged the status quo in the UN system.

Solheim was also severely criticized for engaging UNEP as a sponsor of a regatta, the Volvo Ocean Race, at a cost of \$500,000. He argued that this was an investment in raising UNEP’s profile and a way to increase awareness about marine plastic litter, but the cost was criticized as exorbitant and the benefit elusive. In 2019, the Office of Internal Oversight Services evaluation of UNEP noted that the organization could not provide a consolidated list of partners and had entered into “questionable partnerships” in recent years.¹⁷⁰ Partnerships are essential, but there is a possibility of choosing the wrong partners—those who might simply seek benefits from association with the main UN environmental institution, or even engage

in greenwashing. “If partnerships run bad and if UNEP’s brand is used for publicity reasons, the whole institution suffers and loses credibility,” said Ambassador Franz Perrez of Switzerland.¹⁷¹ UNEP’s eagerness to do work on the ground and engage in more partnerships, therefore, requires a full-fledged, systematic risk assessment and risk-management strategy.

PARTNERSHIPS, CAMPAIGNS, AND CONTRIBUTIONS

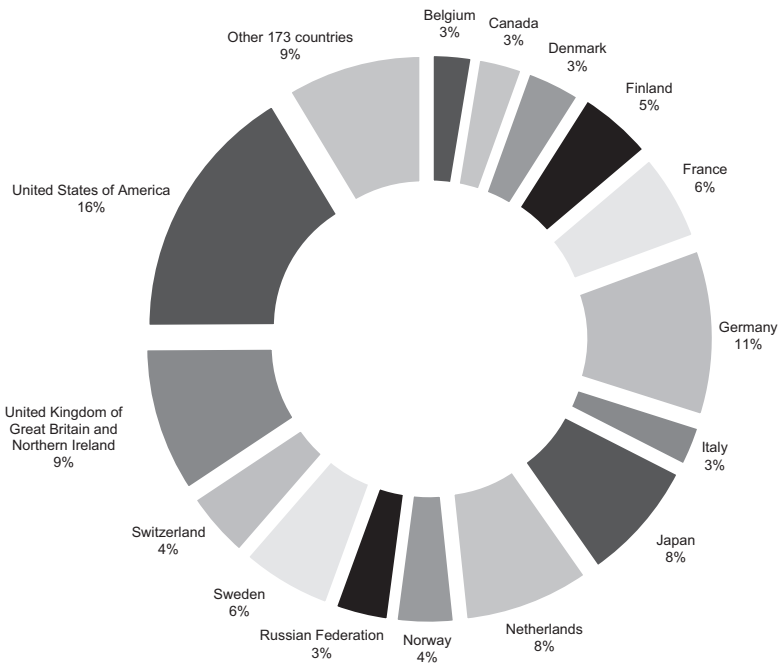
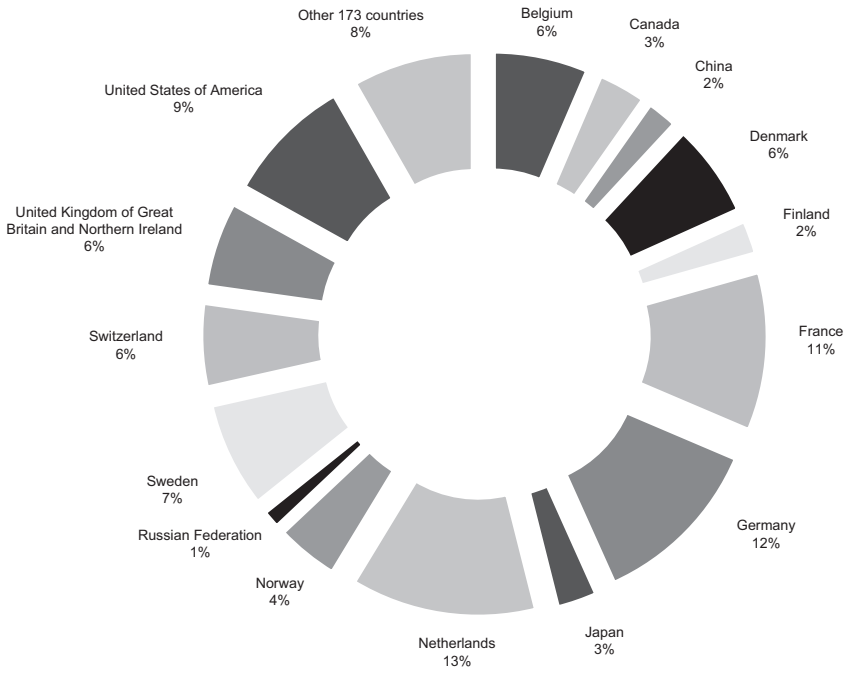
Integrating environmental goals into development objectives had become a baseline after 2015, when governments unanimously adopted the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. Solheim’s aim, therefore, was to work with various businesses on environmental issues relevant to their own interests—working with shipping and fishing, for example, to “clean up the oceans, get rid of the enormous volumes of marine litter that are destroying life, and make fisheries sustainable,” or working with the tourism industry to protect wildlife.¹⁷² UNEP launched and engaged in a series of campaigns, including Wild for Life, Breathe Life, and Clean Seas, and partnerships such as the Global Partnership on Marine Litter. It also launched an international law-enforcement operation against marine pollution with INTERPOL and EUROPOL called 30 Days at Sea and an awareness campaign called #PollutionCrime. The operation was “to make sure that there is no impunity for the perpetrators of marine pollution crime,” Solheim noted.¹⁷³ Indeed, plastics regulation became a landmark initiative for UNEP and is an issue that Norway continues to invest in.

Solheim increased engagement with business and launched the Science-Policy-Business Forum, an incubator of joint initiatives with the private sector such as a digital platform on marine litter developed by IBM and cooperation with the international nitrogen initiative. As Isis Alvarez, who represented the women’s major group at the UN Environment Assembly in 2017, noted, however, some saw this as a “corporate takeover of the UN.”¹⁷⁴ Concurrently, UNEP’s engagement with civil society shifted. Civil society has been a core constituency of UNEP providing expertise, support, outreach, and legitimacy. Whenever issues became controversial, however, UNEP leadership has kept civil society out. “When civil society said something that might not be pleasant for governments or for UNEP, anything perceived as criticism, they were excluded and

shunned," a staff member said. "This dynamic still holds."¹⁷⁵ As a normative agency, UNEP is not able to deliver on the ground without relying on civil society's capacity to produce results; civil society, therefore, is indispensable in project work. The relationship with civil society, however, is mostly one of tokenism. "UNEP never valued civil society," Annabell Waititu remarked. "They wanted to look politically correct but always kept civil society on the periphery. They did not use the agenda setting powers and implementation capacity of civil society."¹⁷⁶ The effect has been a downward spiral, and many civil society groups have lost interest in working with UNEP. Solheim inherited a UNEP that had neither a good relationship with civil society nor a strategy for engaging it and his inexperience in this area further contributed to his marginalization.¹⁷⁷

Heavy reliance on extrabudgetary funds rather than core funding for operations necessitates that UNEP reach out to governments regularly and raise funds for people and projects that align with the agendas of these governments' leaders. Solheim reacted against the limitations this reality entailed: "The European Union wants to give money to what they consider their agenda, not what we want to get money for," he remarked. As previously noted, Solheim supported many of China and India's initiatives, campaigns, and projects, because these governments' priorities dovetailed with his priorities for UNEP. He supported a beach-cleaning campaign in India, but, as a European government official noted, "beach-cleaning campaigns are not sufficient; government action and a level playing field are critical."¹⁷⁸ Solheim praised China's efforts in sustainable development but also cautioned against the country's export of coal power plants to Africa.¹⁷⁹ Solheim's efforts to engage China were successful and China's contributions to the Environment Fund tripled, from the \$500,000 that China had contributed from 2010 to 2017 to \$1.5 million in 2018. China became one of UNEP's top fifteen Environment Fund contributors that year and has maintained the level of contributions and the top 15 rank (see figure 6.5). In addition, China became a significant donor of extrabudgetary resources. Its contributions jumped from \$350,000 in 2015 to \$2.5 million in 2016 and to \$5.7 million in 2017. In 2019, however, the contribution was down to \$1.36 million.

As a result of the controversy that embroiled UNEP and Solheim, some donors pulled away, and Denmark and Sweden froze their financial



6.5 Top fifteen contributors in 2019 (top) and aggregately since 1973 (bottom).

contributions.¹⁸⁰ In 2018, only eighty-six countries contributed to the Environment Fund, compared to ninety-six in 2014. In 2018, the Fund had diminished by almost 25 percent from the \$84 million level in 2014, and was almost at the same level as in 2007, \$67.4 million. In 2019, the number of contributors dropped even further; as of January 1, 2020, only eighty countries had contributed a total of \$70 million for 2019.

CONTROVERSIAL LEADERSHIP

Erik Solheim's term as UNEP's executive director began on a high note and collapsed with the loss of confidence in his leadership. As Minister of Environment and International Development in Norway, Solheim had been "morally driven, full of energy, and able to take a political situation to advance the issues he cared about, and never his personal agenda," colleagues at the ministry noted. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also remarked that Solheim had struck him as "a very devoted and committed person and the right leader for UNEP" as he carried out the selection process for an executive director in 2016. Solheim's Norwegian colleagues commented, however, that he was also hyperactive and easily frustrated when rules prevented him from doing what he thought was right. He would break the rules and capitalize on the opportunities that created. Ultimately, Solheim's leadership was highly controversial because of what some considered excessive travel, inept management, and open disregard for UN rules.

The United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services conducted an audit of official travel at UNEP in 2018 with the objective of assessing the adequacy and effectiveness of existing internal controls. The inquiry into Solheim's travel was a pretext for an inquiry into management misconduct. The report criticized UNEP and its leadership for lack of accountability and transparency, possible mismanagement of travel funds, and deliberate defiance of regulations and rules that senior management deemed "bureaucratic" and "political."¹⁸¹ Erik Solheim challenged the report and vigorously defended all his travel as a critical part of his job. "I can't ask the leader of Coca-Cola to come see me in Nairobi, I have to go visit him," he remarked, referring to the work he championed on getting rid of plastic bottles and reducing marine litter.¹⁸² Indeed, as the analysis in this chapter shows, every UNEP executive director has had to undertake

extensive travel. In the early days, that meant being away from headquarters for months on end. The sheer distance, limited availability of travel options, and the need to directly connect with constituencies, given that 60 percent of countries are not represented in Nairobi and only a few are represented by special environmental envoys, demand that the executive director travel to capitals and conferences.

Extensive travel is hardly unique to UNEP. As the UN Joint Inspection Unit noted in a 2017 Review of Air Travel Policies in the United Nations System, “travel expenses are one of the largest budget components of the United Nations system organizations after staff costs.”¹⁸³ UNEP’s travel costs are average when compared to other UN agencies but increased transparency and accountability exposed irregularities. Controls over the travel authorization process were weak, many trips were not appropriately authorized prior to travel, evidence of the necessity to travel was incomplete or missing, and there was no oversight or accountability mechanism in place to oversee the travels undertaken.¹⁸⁴

Dissatisfaction with Solheim’s management style was perhaps the root cause of the complaints and the audit. In his view, he was trying to change the rigid, complicated bureaucratic system of the United Nations. He saw the need for serious reform to ensure that the United Nations could effectively deliver for people and the planet. As he reflected upon the developments in 2018, Solheim noted, “If we don’t stand up for those who try to drive reform, everyone will learn to be risk averse.”¹⁸⁵ His insistence on reforming the heavy UN bureaucracy is not misplaced. As Oli Brown wrote, however, Solheim made three main mistakes: he assumed the role of a general and ignored the functions of a secretary, he snubbed the member states, and he made repeated political errors.¹⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

Leadership is “multi-level, processual, contextual and interactive,” and leaders operate in complex social-relational systems.¹⁸⁷ International institutions depend upon a fragile coalition that requires continuous attention and nurturing, which demands that leaders foster respect among the various groups that make up the coalition, that they work continuously to



6.6 UNEP Executive Director Erik Solheim (left) participates in the largest beach cleanup in history at Versova Beach in Mumbai, India, in May 2018. Credit: UNEP.

create and maintain support for the organization and its mission, and that they respond responsibly to pressures in the organization and its milieu.¹⁸⁸

Leadership of UNEP takes place within the United Nations as an organization and a system and is influenced by the vision and style of the UN Secretary-General serving at the time. Like each UN Secretary-General, each UNEP executive director articulated a vision for the organization that responded to the dynamics of the time.¹⁸⁹ A compelling vision serves as the bridge from the organization's present to its future. Sustaining a vision and translating it into practice rests on the culture of an organization; the persistent, patterned way of thinking about central tasks; and human relationships within an organization. "Culture is to an organization what personality is to an individual," James Wilson wrote when describing bureaucracies, and "like human culture generally, it is passed from one generation to the next. It changes slowly, if at all."¹⁹⁰ Thus, even as executive directors have changed, UNEP's organizational culture has persisted. It is only through the deliberate efforts of executive directors that the organization culture changes.

Ultimately, the men and women who have led UNEP over time shaped the organization and thus influenced the collective ability of the international community to define and address the environmental issues of the time. Each executive director, except Maurice Strong, UNEP's inaugural director, started off from the baseline their predecessor had established. They all had to operate within a particular socioeconomic, political, and environmental reality that shaped the organization. Mostafa Tolba focused on concrete global environmental problems and, as US Ambassador Richard Benedick remarked, "broke all the stereotypes of the docile United Nations servant to governments."¹⁹¹ Through Tolba, UNEP took a position in favor of strong international regulation and put in place the building blocks of science and diplomacy for international cooperation. Subsequent directors have focused on enabling UNEP to work across issues and across sectors as the institutional landscape became increasingly crowded and competitive. Their individual leadership types and styles have left an imprint on UNEP, and UNEP has left an imprint on their lives.

In June 2019, Danish economist and environmentalist Inger Andersen became UNEP's seventh executive director. Having served as Director General of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), "the world's largest and most diverse environmental network," and at the World Bank and UNDP, she comes to UNEP with experience across issues, scales, and geographies. "My career has intersected with UNEP's journey many times over the past decades," Andersen noted in our interview in 2019, "and I see the UNEP brand as incredibly strong, with a mandate which is second to none." Yet, she continued, "while the duck may be serene, it is paddling very hard, accomplishing an amazing amount with very little." Andersen comes in at a time when ecosystems are collapsing, political systems are unresponsive, and social systems are buckling under increasing inequality. "Our kids are in the streets," she notes. "Never before have we had such an engaged youth movement that is focused on the sins of our generation and is mercilessly hammering at reform and changing the system. Never have we had the kind of coverage we have now in the media. Never before have we had the kind of interconnectivity that we have today. And we at UNEP need to harness all these forces of impact." As Andersen assumed UNEP's leadership, she acknowledged that

change and uncertainty often go hand in hand and that transparency and communication will be important. As global environmental governance evolves, transparency, communication, and public scrutiny become all the more important in these “unusual times.” Understanding why and how the United Nations Environment Programme was envisioned and created and what happened to the original plan for a system of global environmental governance is essential. Learning from past experiences will be critical to planning for the future.

