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Author	Piyaporn Wongruang
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World waiting on rebirth of rio spirit

Environmentalists in Jakarta tossed about ways to recapture the intensity of the 1992 Earth Summit

Piyaporn Wongruang

The Asia-Europe Environment Forum's regional workshop held in Jakarta, Indonesia was one of at least three regional and international forums held in Southeast Asia in the last month. The delegates at the high-level dialogue on reforming the institutional framework for sustainable development gathered in Jakarta to discuss new mechanisms to address increasingly complex environmental challenges. These include food security as well as climate change.

Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit, the global conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 which was acclaimed as one of the most successful environmental forums in history. It produced a set of clear agendas and principles for global communities to pursue development based on sustainability. But despite the considerable efforts from a great many groups in the 20 years since the Rio Summit, the achievements have been scarce, while the challenges multiply.

The conclusions of the Asia-Europe Environment Forum's regional workshop will be presented to 46 Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) member states for their consideration ahead of the Rio+20 meeting next year.

It was found that all too often, environmental agencies have overlapping mandates and responsibilities.

This is most obvious in the case of the United Nations, where about 40 agencies' mandates and responsibilities are either overlapping or fragmented.

"The system is fragmented. There are over 500 multilateral environmental agreements in place, and these are not integrated," said Dr Bradnee Chambers, Head of the Environmental Law and Governance Branch of the United Nations Environmental Programme (Unep). "The UN itself has 43 agencies working on the environment. We have some coordination but not enough."

Dr Chambers also said incremental reform is not enough, and that long-term environmental governance is needed to tackle the current problems and cope with the new challenges.

On the positive side, during the last few years in particular some ideas have taken shape toward a new institutional governance structure for environmental work.

The most modest option is upgrading Unep, which currently only has the status of a UN programme. As such, it has a weak mandate with regard to implementation, which is seen as crucial for work at the regional and national levels.

Some experts have proposed making Unep a global environmental organisation.

Other possibilities are integrating environmental issues into the mandate of the UN Economic and Social Council and transforming it into a more powerful organisation. The most extreme proposal offered in Jakarta was the creation of a new sustainable development organisation which would provide an umbrella for all economic, social, and environmental work.

Surendra Shrestha, team leader of the Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development, Secretariat for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), told the Bangkok Post Sunday that all options are on the table.

He said the decision on what steps are taken will be greatly influenced by the way that member states react to some external factors which may be seen as accelerating their decision-making processes, like disasters.

"Everybody agrees that there has to be an institutional change, but how far to go depends on this factor."

Jean-Pierre Thebault, ambassador for the environment from France, said in the meantime action must be taken at the coming Rio+20 summit. He added that along with institutional reform, the right political leadership is essential.

The ambassador said the world is experiencing an emergency on sustainable development issues because the three crucial dimensions of the problem _ social, economic, and environmental _ have not yet been well integrated. The world needs to find the solutions, and this is where an institutional framework for sustainable development comes in.

Martin Khor, executive director of the South Centre, agreed that, 20 years after the 1992 Rio Summit, the picture for global sustainable development has deteriorated.

Mr Khor said the vision presented at Rio was far-reaching and the agenda was ambitious, but the institutions charged with following up on the agreements were weak. The great deficiency has been in implementation.

Agencies would have to "greatly" strengthen the sustainable development architecture through Rio+20.

Mr Khor said it remains to be seen whether more timely and effective bodies will emerge to deal with the increasingly complex issues, especially at the regional and national levels where the impacts of climate change will be felt first. Government agencies are operating in a hierarchical manner. A bigger role for civil society groups would help jump-start the reform process.