

Strengths

and Weaknesses

Michael Scoullos assesses UNEP-MAP from an NGO perspective

UNEP/MAP, with the Barcelona Convention, is the creation of the vision, enthusiasm, commitment and drive of the generation of the early 70s, which put the environment onto local, national and international political agendas. A second wave of euphoria – of sustainable development – resulted in the revised Barcelona Convention of 1995 with an enlarged scope, new Protocols and the Mediterranean Commission of Sustainable Development (MCSDD), a body with both an essential advisory role and a strong symbolic political importance.

The third, current phase, which started with the Johannesburg Summit, is marked by fundamental political and economic changes in the region, mostly linked with attempts at economic development and general geopolitical orientations. Three more Mediterranean countries have recently joined the European Union (EU), increasing the Convention's EU Contracting Parties to eight.

So it is useful to examine the organisation's strengths and weakness to find ways of improving its performance and of making it more effective and sustainable.

Strengths and potential

1. UNEP/MAP fills a gap. It is the only Mediterranean Convention bringing together North, East and South and all the region's countries. It does so on the two most uniting themes: environment and sustainable development.
2. It has a balanced distribution of regional centers covering issues reflecting the countries' and stakeholders' particular interests.
3. NGO collaboration, and the Civil Society partnership within it, is very well developed.
4. Its MCSDD is an innovative and clever scheme, covering the need for a regional CSD and corresponding to the UN Millennium Development Goals etc., under the Barcelona Convention framework.
5. Its EU connection and provisions, and the genuine efforts for collaboration and involvement of UNEP/MAP in EU programs and processes, with funds partly secured.
6. The membership of economically strong Contracting Parties (CPs) that could substantially support the Secretariat and Regional Centers.
7. Providing an important platform for understanding major environmental and sustainable development issues in a positive spirit in the region.

Weaknesses and challenges

1. Like all UN Conventions, it is based on voluntary compliance without sanctions and penalties for those who don't observe it and don't fulfill their commitments.
2. Weakness in CPs in infrastructures and in available means and human resources are reflected in the slow progress and lack

of achievements in some aspects of the Convention and its Protocols.

3. Weaknesses in the operation of Civil Society in many Mediterranean countries - resulting from democratic deficit, lack of NGO culture and lack of basic means – reduces pressure on governments to implement the Barcelona Convention commitments.
4. Difficult and abstract issues within its agenda attract a low level of public interest and press coverage.
5. Deficits in education and information remain at both country and local levels.
6. There are Secretariat difficulties in effectively channeling regular and interesting information, resulting in relatively low visibility.
7. The dependence of the Barcelona Convention on contacting governments exclusively through Environment Ministries – with some input from Ministries of Foreign Affairs, but no others – reduces its political weight.
8. The dominance of the MCSDD by countries – with the same people being frequently the focal points for the Convention and its Protocols – reduces it to a Working Party, restricting its potential.
9. The EU and its members – plus several more CPs which hope to join and others which have special bilateral links with it – shift its overall weight towards observing EU legislation and norms. Meanwhile progress may be slower in areas where the EU does not yet have its own legislation. So there is a dynamic relationship between EU countries' priorities and the level of implementation in the entire region.
10. Often NGO reactions similarly follow northern priorities, though this is less visible in Federations such as MIO-ECSDE.
11. Practical problems inevitably arise from the vast range of UNEP/MAP competence to be covered (particularly with Sustainable Development in the agenda) without adequate means or sufficient support by non-environmental parts of governments and other specialized UN agencies.
12. The fact that the Mediterranean region is not a UN region adds to the difficulties.

The challenge is to turn most of the apparent weaknesses into advantages. NGOs could greatly help in this because of their flexibility, wide and vertical distribution and continuity in actions. The EU experience, resources and strength should be properly and effectively used by UNEP/MAP, the CPs and the Partners of the Barcelona Convention without losing its independence and character.

The ability of Civil Society, particularly NGOs, to act must be strengthened with institutional and material support. If strong, they will promote the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development and the implementation of the Barcelona Convention and its Protocols, though training and monitoring and through spreading the optimistic message of productive and innovative decision making, in cooperation with authorities and Civil Society throughout the region ■

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