

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARISING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE CHALLENGE

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Abstract

The paper reviews the development of global environmental governance principle and the challenges facing the implementation of global environmental governance.

Introduction

Sustainable development concept cuts across many areas, including policy, international development, trade, urban and land-use planning, environmental protection, energy, agriculture and industry. Sustainable development simply refers to the 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WECD, 1987: 4).

The concept of sustainable development which arose from the United Nations appointed Brundtland Commission's (1984-1987) report, titled 'Our Common Future', set the motion for global environmental governance by calling for a new international political agenda for the construction of effective international

cooperation to manage ecological and economic interdependences. The commission requested for new international institutions for global environmental governance and for changes in existing international agencies concerned with development, trade regulations and agriculture (Baker, 2006: 51).

Global environmental politics and policies first of all evolved in the early 1970s when it became clear that individual states could not solitarily play a central role in environmental management. At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was created as the lead actor in coordinating environmental activities within the UN agencies and as a catalyst for new initiatives (Najam *et al*, 2006).

The subsequent internationalisation of environmental management brought forward series of negotiations and agreements among states, non-state actors like environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and corporate economic actors. The collective activity, including the development of international environmental regimes, their formal and informal institutional arrangements, their norms and principles, their multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) as well as their conventions and protocols when combined with the involvement of civil society resulted in the emergence of the term 'Global Environmental Governance' (Baker, 2006:53).

Governance can be understood as steering the society towards collective goals. The term 'new practises in environmental governance' refers to the participation of non-state actors, alongside state and international organisations, as well as the utilisation of a wide range of policy instruments (including legal, voluntary and market instruments), normative and governance principles to promote sustainable development (Barker, 2006: 9).

According to Young (1997), Global Environmental Governance (GEG) refers to:

The establishment and operations of a set of rules of conduct that define practice, assign roles and guide interaction so as to enable state and non-state actors to grapple with collective environmental problems within and across state boundaries.

GEG consists of the sum of organizations, policy instruments, financing mechanisms, rules, procedures and norms that regulate the processes of global environmental protection (Najam *et al*, 2006). It encompasses the management of environmental impacts, risks, performance and opportunities within a full range of best practices (White and Klernam, 2004) aimed at achieving sustainable development.

The paper reviews the development of global environmental governance principle and the challenges facing the implementation of global environmental governance.

The Development of Global Environmental Governance

The United Nations (UN) has played the most significant role in the advancement of global environmental governance. The UN currently has over thirty specialised agencies and programmes targeted at the promotion of global environmental governance. They range from agencies and programmes that are specifically environmentally concerned, like the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the Environmental Management Group (EMG), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to major agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the highly political institutions such as the World Bank as well as the World Trade Organization (WTO), who now claim sustainable development to be central to their overarching goals. A similar growth of interest is also seen within non-UN international

and regional institutions in terms of environmental and sustainable development concerns.

The UN conference on the Human Environment (Skocklohm, 1972) marked the beginning of the new era of international cooperation on the environment. The conference was based on two basic beliefs:

- Poverty was a cause of environmental degradation, and
- Environmental problems could be solved by the application of scientific knowledge and technological knowhow.

The conference helped to legitimise the view that environmental problems are of a global nature and lead to the formation of international structures and organisations to deal with them. The conference also stimulated member states of the United Nations to establish environmental ministries and agencies.

The convention also set the motion for the development of international laws in relation to marine pollution, depletion of the ozone layer and transboundary movement of waste. The convention marked the beginning of the explosive growth of environmental NGOs and also spurred a series of international conventions on the environment.

By the 1990s, there were a substantial number of specific international environmental regimes, dealing with an array of environmental matters, from hazardous waste, ozone depletion and biodiversity loss to climate change. Institutional structures, principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures and action programmes were formal and informal international environmental regimes set in place to address specific environmental issues (Young, 1997). Their task were to secure negotiations, set standards of environmental management, especially of trans-boundary pollution, and find effective responses to the challenges presented by global environmental change. Example of such regimes under the auspices of the United Nations

includes the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) set up to deal with climate change, and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) set up to address the issue of biodiversity loss (Baker, 2006: 53).

Such conventions provided a general framework for action, while their associated technical protocols outline steps to address specific aspects of the problem. Under the UNFCCC, the Kyoto protocol allocates emission reduction targets to individual states in order to combat climate change. Similarly, under the UNCBD, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety deals with the safe transfer of living modified organism.

Sustainable Development and the Principles of Global Environmental Governance

The Brundtland Report created awareness to the need to address the imbalances in the structures of global environmental governance and called for the creation of a new a system of governance. The report represents the mainstream thinking about the relationship between the environment and development (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000).

The report noted that a guiding principle for such reform was the fair and equitable distribution of bargain power, so as to ensure that the voice of the world's poor is heard and indeed reflected in international decisions and outcomes. This call led to the establishment of a set of principles for good governance practice by the UN conventions. The Rio Earth Summit which focused on the link between the environment and development and the practical issues surrounding the promotion of the sustainable development outlined several good governance for sustainable development. The general principles of good governance include:

- The rule of law
- Transparency and accountability

- Effectiveness and efficiency
- Subsidiary: actions should be taken at the appropriate level of government
- Participation and responsiveness to the need of stakeholders
- Gender equity

The convention also outlined specific good governance principles, like:

- The Precautionary principle
- Principle of common but differentiated responsibilities
- Ecosystems approach
- The 'polluter pays' principle
- Principle of environmental policy integration (Baker, 2006: 71)

Challenges to the Global Environmental Governance

Environmental governance challenges the traditional models of development within the society and the international level. It has, for example, challenged the ability and legitimacy of traditional forms of government intervention and policy making to address the complex issues posed by the promotion of sustainable development. Rather than tolerating the national governments in their tasks to manage the environment with their traditional models, environmental governance has prompted the promotion of sustainable development engagements across all levels of social organisation, from the international, national, sub-national, societal to the level of the individual (Baker, 2006: 9).

The Brundtland Report re-conceptualisation of environmental problems, like pollution and degradation as a global

challenge, contributed to its call for new arrangements in global environmental governance by:

- Getting at the source through supporting development that is economically and ecologically sustainable;
- Dealing with the effects by enforcing environmental protection measures and resource management;
- Assessing global risks by identifying, assessing and reporting on risks of irreversible damage to natural systems and threats to the survival, security and well being of the world community;
- Making informed choices through supporting the involvement of an informed public, NGOs and the scientific community;
- Providing legal means by ensuring that national laws keeps up with the accelerating pace and expanding scale of impacts on the ecological basis of development;
- Investing in our future by ensuring that multilateral financial institutions, including the World Bank, make a fundamental commitment to sustainable development and that bilateral aid agencies adopt a new environmental priority and focus (WECD, 1987: 20-1; Baker, 2006: 52).

In the view of Najam *et al* (2006: 29), the challenges facing global environmental governance are endemic to the international systems that coordinate the governance principles. These challenges include the:

The Proliferation of MEAs and fragmentation of GEG

The proliferation of MEAs, and the resulting fragmentation of international environmental institutions, is often described as one of the key challenges of GEG. The rapid growth of environmental agreements, MEA-related instruments and geographically dispersed institutions has left environmental governance in

disarray. There are inconsistencies in rules and norms, and the hectic pace of activities can overwhelm and financially drain some, particularly the poorest, countries.

All of this feed into the concerns that the GEG system is operating at a suboptimal level: its agreements, institutions and resources are unable to achieve their full potential and possible synergies remain unexploited. The very ability of GEG to address complex interconnected environmental threats is questioned because the incoherent system of solutions is becoming even more complex than the problems it was meant to address.

Lack of cooperation and coordination among international organizations

The rapid growth in the number of actors that now impact global environmental governance has made coordination more important, but also more difficult. The creation of the GEF as a main financing mechanism, the various MEA secretariats and the CSD have further detracted from UNEP's authority and led to fractious turf wars and inter-agency politics. This climate of inter-agency distrust, uneven resource endowments and unclear (and sometimes contradictory) mandates from the member states, has not been conducive to either institutional cooperation or coordination. The challenge of coordination in policies and implementation lies at the heart of the GEG crisis, as it has led to gaps in international policy, fragmentation of effort and sometimes competing or incoherent decision-making structures.

Lack of implementation, enforcement and effectiveness in GEG

The global environmental governance system has been very prolific in negotiating MEAs but, except for a few exceptions, has a rather dismal record of turning agreements into actual change on the ground in terms of either the quality of the environment or the

lives of those who live in those environments. The crux of the challenge here is that the GEG system has been so frantically obsessed with negotiating new agreements that it has paid little attention to whether these agreements perform or not.

Inefficient use of resources

There are many sources of funding for the global environment: multilateral financial flows associated with multilateral organizations; MEAs and multilateral financial mechanisms; debt relief; private capital flows; non-traditional sources of financing; financing via the non-governmental sector; and domestic capital flows. Still, elements of the GEG system remain chronically underfunded and the lack of financial resources is considered to be a key obstacle to treaty compliance, particularly in developing countries. Inefficiency in the use of the monies that are available is another chronic complaint. Inefficiencies are everybody's loss: they act as a disincentive for donors to invest in the system, diminish the credibility of the system's institutions and fail to provide funds to those who need them most.

GEG outside the environmental arena

Many of the most important decisions affecting the environment occur outside the complex web of international treaties and organizations that comprise the formal GEG system. Decisions related to investment, development, and trade affect patterns of natural resource use, production and consumption to, arguably, an even greater extent than the negotiation of MEAs. Security and environment are linked through both the potential for conflict arising from scarcity of natural resources and environmental degradation in conflict zones. Environmental issues are also spilling over into the health arena, as the health risks posed by environmental degradation become increasingly prevalent.

The system of international trade consists of trade rules arising from World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements, and various Regional Free Trade Agreements and their respective dispute resolution mechanisms have particularly deep impacts on global environmental governance.

The international system of finance and investment influences long-term national development trajectories through project finance and national economic policy of developing nations. Moreover, there is a large imbalance between trade and financial institutions and environmental institutions. The financial resources and political clout of Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) and development agencies dwarf those of UNEP and the GEF. Therefore, it is not surprising that economic priorities often take precedence over the environmental considerations. The key issue facing global environmental governance is how to more effectively mainstream environmental considerations into economic decisions and into other non-environmental arenas.

Non-state actors in a state-centric system

The debate on environmental governance has largely centred on how to reform a state-centric system of international organizations, multilateral treaties and national government implementation. The shortcomings of GEG are analyzed in terms of the inability of international organizations to coordinate activities and the failure of national governments to implement treaties. As a result, the traditional approach to GEG reform often overlooks the tremendous contribution and increasing involvement of civil society actors and the private sector in international policy-making, capacity building and implementation.

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