

Current Debates

Evolution of Global Environmental Governance and the United Nations

Mukul Sanwal

The defining feature of global environmental governance has been the development of multilateral environmental agreements catalyzed by the United Nations. Research attention has consequently focused on institutional design of environmental regimes. It has recently been claimed that ossification has occurred in global environmental policy-making and no new learning is taking place.¹ In fact, new policy approaches are emerging from multilateral environmental agreements, our understanding of the issues has deepened and broadened based on the experience of the past three decades, and underlying economic and social changes worldwide provide the opportunity to catalyze innovative ways to galvanize capital markets. These trends need to be brought together in a new paradigm to drive implementation, with the United Nations acting as a node of interactive clusters of driving forces supporting environmentally sustainable global economic growth.

Reframing the Environmental Concern

The current impasse over how to achieve sustainable development is largely the product of the way the agenda has been framed in global efforts to link environment and development. The adoption of an issue-based approach, with social and economic dimensions treated as ancillary to the environmental problem, led to reliance on multilateral environmental agreements to promote international cooperation.² As environmental degradation has continued unabated, it has been argued that endless international negotiations and treaties have only created the illusion of progress on global environmental threats and the current approach to dealing with global environmental problems is inadequate.³ In this

1. Depledge 2006.

2. Sanwal 2004.

3. Speth 2004.

article I argue that in fact multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), by providing forums for regular dialogue, have achieved significant results in terms of problem solving by refining and deepening understanding of the problems. This process has shaped not only the way the issues are framed, but also how the problem-solving strategies are defined and how the results are evaluated. This is evident in at least six policy areas, as described below. These policy shifts focus on areas of convergence, which are very different from the way the agenda has been framed in the past—an approach which focused on responsibilities, rights and obligations of states, and the tensions inherent in burden and benefit sharing.

1. Arrangements that consider the environment as a distinct and separate policy issue are not suitable means to deal with longer-term transitions that require mainstreaming into national economic development strategies and private sector investment decisions.

There are numerous examples where the importance of economic development has been recognized as integral to addressing environmental problems. The Delhi Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change in 2002, links climate with energy and sustainable development, sees climate change as largely an economic challenge, and recognizes the development priority of access to energy services. It also stresses international cooperation for the development of new technologies, through private sector involvement, investments and supportive public policies.⁴ A review of its first ten years conducted by the sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2002, found that the nature and scope of the measures for implementation require making complex and integrated policy choices that call for coordination and strong political will at the national level. It also found that the Convention will succeed in ensuring sustainable use and level of conservation that benefits everyone only if its importance is recognized in the wider context of economic development and global change, and that mechanisms for engaging the private sector in implementation need to be identified.⁵ A further example is the Convention to Combat Desertification, which has been characterized as a multilateral instrument for development cooperation.⁶

2. New approaches to global environmental governance incorporate strategic planning, outlining future goals, rather than merely describing what could happen.

Strategic planning has been adopted in a variety of forums, from governments, to regional bodies, to international treaties and other international mechanisms. The United Kingdom, for example, announced that it will be integrating

4. FCCC 2003.

5. UNEP/CBD 2002; and UNEP 2002b.

6. Kjellen 2003.

reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases as a key element of energy policies.⁷ The European Commission is similarly researching strategic linkages between climate change, technology and energy policies.⁸ Strategic planning has also taken place under international environmental treaty frameworks, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity⁹ and the Multilateral Fund for the Implementation of the Montreal Protocol.¹⁰ The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) adopted a strategic plan in 2000 for international trade in wild fauna and flora to be conducted in a sustainable manner, through deeper understanding of the economic issues and involvement of civil society.¹¹ A recent study advocates re-examination of global biodiversity and forest conservation conventions and mechanisms to ensure that these foster and support community conservation, through new institutional models.¹² The non-legally binding Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICAM), adopted in 2006, has a strong cross-sectoral dimension, including involvement of nongovernmental actors and impact on regional processes.¹³

3. The role of new considerations, such as markets and external forces, have taken on key importance as the focus shifts from identifying the scale of the damage to implementation of measures to mitigate that damage.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, published in 2005, confirms the importance of ecosystem services and markets. It argues that “most resource management decisions are most strongly influenced by ecosystem services entering markets . . . the most important public policy decisions affecting ecosystems are often made by agencies and policy arenas other than those charged with protecting ecosystems.” It notes, for example, that “forest management is influenced more strongly by actions outside the forest sector, such as trade policies and institutions, macroeconomic policies, and policies in other sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure, energy, and mining, than those within it.”¹⁴ Since current arrangements adopt a sectoral approach, it is not surprising that a survey of initial impacts of the assessment, one year after the release of the technical reports, has found a mixed policy impact.¹⁵

4. Globalization and the recognition that investment, technology and trade are essential means of implementation have changed the context within which future actions to protect the environment will be undertaken.

7. United Kingdom 2003.

8. European Commission 2003.

9. UNEP/CBD 2002; and UNEP 2002b

10. UNEP/Ozl 2002; and UNEP 2002a

11. CITES 2000.

12. Molnar 2004.

13. Logomasini 2006.

14. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005.

15. Reid 2006.

The Environmental Performance Index, developed to assess effectiveness of policies,¹⁶ identifies two main drivers of environmental performance. First, policy choices affect performance, because at every level of development some countries achieve environmental results that far exceed their peers. Second, governance structures are vital to support pollution control and natural resource management. Also, because of globalization, issues are being redefined in socio-economic terms. For example, it is now recognized that addressing biodiversity requires changes in the way resources are used and benefits distributed.¹⁷ Increasing global investment flows provide opportunities for the integration of environmental concerns in the broader sustainable development agenda. It is also widely recognized that protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development depends on changing consumption and production patterns and is essential for the eradication of poverty.¹⁸

5. Technology is expected to be a key driver for change, linking knowledge with action.

Since local environmental problems attain global dimensions when they are caused by human impact whose scale is deep and scope wide, they require technical change at the strategic level, rather than at the unit, or project level. Recent calls for environmental governance reform reflect a realization that, given the scale of global environmental problems, there are limits to what can be achieved through action at the sector level alone. New technologies are also necessary. For example, the goal of the International Partnership for the Hydrogen Economy is to organize, evaluate and coordinate multinational research, development and deployment programs that advance the transition to a global hydrogen economy. Even a price on carbon dioxide emissions, on its own, will not be enough to deal with global warming.¹⁹ A recent paper prepared by the OECD argues that despite efforts spanning 15 years countries have found it extremely difficult to construct a regime that will limit emissions of greenhouse gases, and while these efforts will continue, "governments are relying on technology to provide solutions, not treaties."²⁰

6. Entirely new policy instruments oriented towards partnerships between public and private sectors are increasingly important

The new information to support environmental policy-making will come from science and from practitioners, in particular, the technologies and forms of organization adopted by governments, private sector and civil society. For example, market creation is considered the most direct approach to solving the prob-

16. Esty 2006.

17. Le Prestre 2002; and UNEP 2006b.

18. UN 2002.

19. Socolow 2006.

20. OECD 2006.

lem of biodiversity decline, by making biodiversity-related policy more compatible with economic development.²¹ In this arrangement there is no need to worry about compliance, as there will only be coordination problems in contrast to cooperation problems. Building an economy that will sustain economic progress requires worldwide effort between governments, private sector and local communities.

Promoting Environmentally Sustainable Global Growth

Sustainable development gained prominence in the international lexicon in 1987, in the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*.²² As the Secretary-General of the World Commission, Jim MacNeill, has recently pointed out, that Report defined sustainable development in several ways—ethical, social, ecological. But only one definition, the one focused on intergenerational equity, grabbed the headlines. The Report also put forward a number of broad directions that development must take if it is to be sustainable. The failure thus far to merge environment with economics in the process of decision-making has been characterized by MacNeill as the “forgotten imperative of sustainable development.”²³

By developing a vision of environmentally sustainable global growth, which includes the sustainable use of natural resources, the United Nations can respond to the concerns of a much larger section of the world’s population than the earlier approach of imposing restrictions on the use of natural resources for safeguarding the interests of future generations.

The scale of current global change underlines the need for new thinking on global environmental policy. At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, it was argued that “. . . the major environmental problems of the developing countries are essentially of a different kind. They are predominantly problems that reflect the poverty and very lack of development of their societies . . . these are problems no less than those of industrial pollution.”²⁴ These concerns shaped the conceptual framework of global environment governance in the last century—treating the environment as a separate policy issue and creating a distinction between global and local environmental problems. This paradigm is losing its relevance because of changes in the global political economy.

As a society goes through the processes of industrialization, public concern, rules, rights and willingness to pay shift in favor of environmental protection.²⁵ In 2005 the combined output of China, India and other developing countries accounted for more than half of world GDP, with countries other than

21. OECD 2004.

22. World Commission on Environment and Development 1987.

23. MacNeill 2006.

24. Founex 1971.

25. Cole 2005.

China and India together making up three-quarters of the total increase in developing countries GDP.²⁶ It has been forecast that Brazil, China, India and Russia would be the world's six largest economies by the middle of this century.²⁷ These countries are set to give the world economy its biggest boost in history, because it is markedly different from the industrial revolution involved only one-third of the world's population. In developing countries people now worry more about pollution. China and India are preparing national programs to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The total number of cars in China and India combined could rise from around 30 million today to 750 million by 2040—more than all the cars on the world's roads today. The price of oil has doubled in the last three years, and buses and light rail have seen a sharp growth while sales of SUVs have declined sharply in America, forcing changes in lifestyles in ways that reduces the environmental damage.

The emerging global consensus around a new paradigm has three implications for the relevance of, and interactions between, international organizations, governments and nonstate actors. First, the focus on results marks a shift from the earlier emphasis on establishing global norms to a role that is demand-driven and country-based. Second, the recognition of the key role of capital markets in economic growth shifts the focus from government or multilateral aid to private investment as the driver of international cooperation and the spread of new technologies. This is significant, as the single most important factor affecting international cooperation has been continuing disagreement on the nature and amount of assistance. Third, implementation requires going beyond traditional forms of cooperation between nation-states to global networks of state and nonstate actors, particularly the private sector. The world community expects the United Nations to continue to provide intellectual leadership by developing a new conceptual approach relating to strategies and institutions for a global environmental policy for the current century, just as it did three decades ago to meet the challenges of the twentieth century.²⁸

Defining Problem-Solving Strategies for Global Environmental Governance

The strategic framework for global environmental governance should incorporate new tools and instruments, including knowledge management, involvement of the private sector, regional thematic partnerships and South-South cooperation. It should also incorporate an operational focus for an approach that provides a differentiated response to different categories of countries. The challenge in supporting countries in formulating a long-term vision for environmentally sustainable global growth is to strengthen national institutions with

26. *The Economist* 2006.

27. Wilson 2005.

28. Berg 2006.

new knowledge, as the basis for dealing with global environmental problems. Current tools such as life cycle analysis have not been found to be useful, and have not even been mentioned in the most recent guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative 2006.²⁹

The focus of the strategic framework for the global environment needs to shift in the direction of developing a common understanding of welfare gains from ecosystem services. Such a shift will support integration of environmental issues in economic and social policies and will help to address selected environmental challenges. Framing issues around ecosystem services will determine strategic goals, impact on other policy arenas and alter policy objectives. For example, ecosystem services can be reflected through recognition of their limited capacity to absorb waste (carbon dioxide, chemicals), as an integral part of the incomes of the poor (forests), as the economic and social gains from new products (biodiversity), and augmentation of water supply and agricultural productivity (watershed management). The global environmental strategy should focus on influencing the drivers of economic growth, that is, capital markets and institutional innovation.

Ecosystem services are the most direct way that nature affects the poor, but many ecosystem services do not flow directly through markets or lack a market price that reflects their full economic value. For example, the livelihoods of the rural poor and the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources are so intimately intertwined that they are best addressed through an integrated approach, irrespective of whether the primary motivation is development or environmental conservation. It is estimated that environmental wealth accounts for 26 percent of the total wealth of low-income countries, versus 13 percent of wealth in middle-income countries and only 2 percent of wealth in developed countries.³⁰ Even though environmental sustainability is one of the Millennium Development Goals, a focus on environmental sustainability is lacking in most poverty reduction strategy papers, and only the Least Developed Countries seem to be really concerned about natural resources.³¹ Local NGOs in developing countries, as well as researchers, have highlighted the gap between global policy-making institutions and local resource-users.³² Garnering the political will to halt ecosystem degradation will depend on demonstrating to policy-makers and society at large the full contribution made by ecosystems to poverty alleviation efforts and to national economic growth.

The lead is now being taken by a very different set of nonstate actors. Goldman Sachs, a global investment bank, has adopted a comprehensive environmental policy that acknowledges the value of ecosystem services, and is funding a new Centre for Environmental Markets for broadening the application of social and environmental factors into loaning and investment activi-

29. UNEP 2006a.

30. Hamilton 2005.

31. Bojo 2003.

32. Adger 2001.

ties.³³ JPMorgan has brought out a corporate bond index designed to reduce exposure to issuers' financial risks arising from climate change.³⁴ As part of the buyout deal of a Texas power utility, the private equity groups have agreed not to build eight coal burning power plants, invest \$ 400 million in helping consumers to use energy more efficiently, build a pilot "clean coal" plant and invest more in alternate energy. The NGO Environmental Defense greeted the new strategy as a "watershed moment in America's fight against global warming."³⁵ Companies are seeking competitive advantage in a carbon constrained future, even though governments are offering little guidance on how policies might change.³⁶

Environmental action is important for the private sector as the transition to sustainable development will both alter existing markets and create new ones. The call for regulation to address the impacts of climate change is now coming from investment banks and reinsurance companies, as the viability of the global economy depends on government intervention to promote the necessary changes in the world's energy infrastructure.³⁷ The focus of analytical work is shifting from population/stock issues and ecosystem management to harnessing the power of entrepreneurs. For example, there are case studies combining private investment with sustainable use of natural resources in a way that produces a satisfactory return on the capital invested.³⁸ In the future partnerships between governments, scientists, private sector and nongovernmental organizations will develop commercial solutions for environmental problems. Multilateral institutions will gain new authority as nodes of networks dealing with specific issues. Analysis of good practices will help to define how and under what circumstances the public and private sectors can work more closely together, to gain a better understanding of issues and for consideration of initiatives to support government action.

It is important to link local viability, distinctive perspectives and global benefits. If a problem has been identified at the global level it does not mean that solutions can only be found at that level. The potential of the regional, and sub regional level, for sharing lessons learned on solutions to common problems is to be encouraged. A promising approach is through committees of experts on the OECD model, for example, facilitating implementation of clusters of Multilateral Environmental Agreements. South-South cooperation around science and technology on issues such as technology transfer, which have traditionally divided countries, will not only serve to bridge the political divide between developed and developing countries that presently characterizes the multilateral system, but also provide sustainable capacity building.

It will be important to focus national level activities to be able to make a

33. Piasecki 2006.

34. JPMorgan 2007.

35. *The Economist* 2007.

36. Lash 2007.

37. Hoffman 2006.

38. Price Waterhouse Coopers 2007.

difference with limited resources. As early as 1997, the General Assembly, in the Agenda for Development, recognized the special situation of Africa and the Least Developed Countries (two thirds of which are in Africa) in the allocation of assistance, as they are not yet integrated in the global market and are unable to mobilize resources domestically. Of the additional US\$ 50 billion pledged as aid by 2010, half will go to Africa which provides an opportunity to strengthen institutions and build capacity to conserve the continent's ecological wealth and develop solutions supportive of development policies. For example, economic prosperity has a positive effect in saving forests.³⁹

Developing new knowledge, and managing the dynamics of change, will not be easy. International consensus on identifying global environmental challenges is relatively easy to arrive at, because it is evidence based and considered "appropriate." While nongovernmental organizations play a key role in raising environmental concerns, even their unity breaks down when it comes to measures for implementation—for example, reconciling the dangers of nuclear energy and the need for clean energy to stop global warming. Agreement on collective action to identify measures for the management of natural resources and the abatement of pollution is difficult because it requires attention to be given to the economic, social and political context. The United Nations will, therefore, need to play a catalytic role at three levels. First, it will undertake analytical work to inform the policy dialogue especially with regard to the economic impact of ecosystem services on human well being. Second, it will promote dissemination of good practices to support implementation, such as institutional strategies for improved natural resources management, market based instruments and information on technologies for environment related infrastructure. Third, it will promote new programs at the regional and global levels in partnership with the private sector and civil society. An example is the Expert Group on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, catalyzed by the United Nations to recommend innovative approaches for mitigation and adaptation to climate change for consideration by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.⁴⁰

The United Nations is at a crossroads as it seeks to identify the particular contribution it can make in supporting international cooperation for environmentally sustainable global growth. A new conceptual framework provides opportunities for the multilateral system to act as a knowledge broker and nurture concepts that are not based on the traditional divides, but on mutual supportiveness; develop new problem solving strategies that can have an influence on other policy arenas; work with a range of actors; devolve governance to the regional level; and, deliver a differentiated response to countries at varying levels of development. The defining feature of global environmental governance in this century will be interactive clusters of institutions and processes galvanizing capital markets and supporting societal action.

39. FAO 2007.

40. SEG 2007.

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