

Introduction

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Environmental threats are bringing new geopolitical, economic and technological challenges to an already unstable world. We are entering a period of intensified environmental stress, in the form of accelerated ecological degradation and greater risk of shortage and disruption in energy and food supplies, as well as heightened political tensions over control of and access to resources. Current trends call into question the effectiveness of existing governance mechanisms at various levels in dealing with global environmental threats and the unequal distribution of resources.

The current architecture for managing international environmental affairs was set up by (and for) nation-states in the second half of the twentieth century. Is it keeping up with the pace of global economic and environmental change and the shifting power balance? Are business-as-usual thinking and outdated institutional designs hindering our ability to meet the threat of dangerous and irreversible environmental change? Is the lack of international consensus on appropriate sustainability governance undermining our capacity to find collective solutions?

In June 2012, the world's governments will gather for the 'Rio+20' United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), a return to the Brazilian city 20 years after it hosted the Rio 'Earth Summit', one of the most high-profile environment summits in UN history. As negotiators prepare for Rio+20, it is appropriate to take stock of global sustainability politics and reflect on its achievements and shortcomings.

Over the past 40 years, global environmental governance has evolved in many respects. Its substantive scope has grown from an initial focus on issues with direct and visible impacts on human health (such as air and water pollution, toxic chemicals or waste) and those related to conservation and endangered species. Many of the issues on the sustainability agenda today are global in nature, from climate change and the degradation of land and ecosystems to ocean acidification, among others. Scientific advances and the exponential growth in computational power over the past four decades have enabled experts to carry out environmental analyses and modelling of complex trends such as global climate change and biodiversity loss. These breakthroughs have contributed to an ever-growing scientific evidence base, which has in turn raised the profile of environmental issues on national and international agendas and enabled sustainability to become a mainstream concern.

Despite these advances, the record of UN summitry is mixed. On the one hand, it has been no mean feat to have established and sustained a process of high-level meetings of state leaders to address the urgent problems of environment and development. The Earth Summit in Rio took place in 1992, 20 years after the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, and was followed in 2002 by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

On the other hand, there is a growing sense of frustration, and even failure, regarding the ability of the international community to implement lasting solutions to environmental problems in a collective manner—not least because the crisis of ecological and economic sustainability remains unresolved. Many urgent environmental problems that were on the agenda in Rio 1992 are still with us today, from climate change to deforestation and the destruction of biodiversity. Food, water and other resources continue to face serious pressures, driven by demographic change, economic growth and shifting consumption patterns. Scientists and even the media have started to refer to a new geological age, the Anthropocene, in which humans have become key drivers of large-scale ecological change. Some argue that human society is pushing against a set of nine planetary boundaries and needs to stay within them to avoid abrupt, non-linear environmental change. If current economic trends persist, global consumption could soon exceed the tolerance thresholds of ecosystems and resources, including cropland, rangeland, fisheries and usable water.

In addition to these geophysical challenges, there is also a crisis of institutions and governance. Over the past half-century, governments have created a range of global instruments and institutions in response to environmental concerns, ranging from international organizations to multilateral treaties and voluntary initiatives. At the national level, environment ministries and agencies have been set up to manage environmental affairs, backed up by new environmental laws. At the international level, numerous bodies have been created—from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to the Commission on Sustainable Development, from the Multilateral Ozone Fund to the Global Environment Facility and now the Global Green Fund—that are charged with gathering information, facilitating international cooperation, disbursing environmental aid and capacity-building. There have also been many attempts to ‘green’ other global public policy agendas, including trade (via the World Trade Organization) and development (through multilateral development banks). Yet implementation gaps persist, and the limited availability and predictability of financial resources has been a key constraint on effective environmental governance, particularly at the global level where multiple and overlapping organizations and issue-areas compete for scarce resources.

As the preparations for Rio+20 suggest, it has become evident that the institutional frameworks in place to deal with matters of sustainability are not delivering. The proliferation of transnational governance instruments involving non-state actors is one indicator of the growing frustration among civil society and business actors about the lack of action by national governments and

international organizations. Despite expanding systems of regulatory control, human health and the environment continue to be damaged by toxic chemicals, waste, air pollution, water stress, destruction of habitats and ecosystems, and species extinction in many parts of the world. This is especially evident in developing countries, whose rapid economic development is adding to global ecological pressures, while their capacity to cope with growing ecological stresses is severely limited.

Underpinning this increasing sense of frustration is a broader crisis of international environmental diplomacy. In the years since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the system of environmental multilateralism has come under increasing strain, with global divisions blocking progress on a number of fronts. The US–EU split on the Kyoto Protocol has held back climate policy since the 1990s, while the North–South divide is widely seen as having contributed to the failure to agree a post-Kyoto agreement (though this may now be changing). The greater variety of voices and positions in international environmental politics, together with more fluid and unstable patterns of coalition-building, also presents new challenges to established modes of environmental multilateralism.

Perhaps the early successes in environment-related diplomacy after 1972, including the large number of multilateral agreements on nearly all ecological issues, obscured the inevitability of a political backlash against ever more demanding environmental regulations. Achievements such as the Montreal Protocol on substances that deplete the ozone layer have not generally been replicated elsewhere. The discussion around historical versus current and future responsibilities has bedevilled the climate change negotiations. The willingness of developing countries to participate in global solutions depends heavily on international assistance from developed countries—an argument that is increasingly difficult to sell to constituencies in industrialized economies at a time of fiscal austerity and growing economic competition from emerging economies.

Today, furthermore, there is closer interaction between the sustainability and security agendas, with ecological and resource constraints increasingly being seen as threatening the future security and even survival of societies. Global warming has thus gained in prominence in the context of security debates, and greater competition over scarce resources such as energy, food and water has attracted growing attention in international circles. While security concerns can help raise the profile of sustainability issues, they may also promote a zero-sum logic and undermine efforts to arrive at internationally coordinated solutions.

Given these complex global challenges and the impending Rio+20 conference, it is time to reflect on what International Relations scholarship can contribute to our understanding of the global politics of sustainability. This special issue is designed to facilitate such a process of reflection. It brings together established scholars who have made important contributions to research on international politics and environmental sustainability. Contributors were asked to review existing strands of International Relations research and assess their contributions and shortcomings, to chart new paths for research on the international politics

of the environment, or to reflect on the state of international debates on how to strengthen international sustainability governance.

Inevitably, this collection of articles cannot provide a comprehensive overview of the entire research landscape. Instead, what we offer is a selective engagement with some key theoretical approaches and conceptual debates, from power politics to institutionalism, political economy and English School theory, and from private governance to international law, UN reform and linkages between international and domestic politics.

The contributions to this special issue

It is a commonplace to argue that the global power balance has shifted dramatically since the end of the Cold War. For many observers, the rise of emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil calls into question many established assumptions about the structure of the international system. In 'Emerging powers, North–South relations and global climate politics', Andrew Hurrell and Sandeep Sengupta examine what impact this global shift has had on international environmental politics. Their analysis of the climate negotiations shows clearly that emerging powers such as India and China have acquired the status of veto-players. Yet the authors reject the widespread perception that the North–South divide is no longer a useful lens through which to view climate politics. Global economic and political inequalities continue to shape the politics of climate change. If anything, it is the North that has, with some success, pursued a revisionist strategy in the climate negotiations, effectively removing the Kyoto Protocol's 'firewall' between developed and developing countries from the design of a future climate agreement.

In 'International political economy and the environment: back to the basics?', Jennifer Clapp and Eric Helleiner also challenge conventional wisdom. Their target is the rapidly growing field of research that examines the interface between political economy and global environmental protection. As Clapp and Helleiner argue, the dominant focus on international cooperative arrangements has served to marginalize certain environmental issues and trends. To correct this imbalance, the authors call for a return to the more structurally oriented origins of international political economy and set out a research agenda that shifts the focus to so-called non-regimes, areas in which broader structural trends in the global economy have negative environmental implications but are not being addressed through international regimes: the globalization of financial markets, high and volatile commodity prices, and shifts in the global economic balance of power.

In 'Global environmentalism and the greening of international society', Robert Falkner draws on a different theoretical tradition to unearth the deeper, long-term impact that environmental ideas have had on international relations. Framing his discussion in an English School context, Falkner explores the normative foundations of international society and asks whether these have been 'greened' over time. He posits that global environmental responsibility is emerging as a fundamental norm, or 'primary institution' in English School parlance, and

explores how it relates to—and clashes with—existing primary institutions of international society, such as sovereignty, international law and the market. The English School approach thus helps to shift the focus to the social structure of international relations that underpins the many issue-specific international environmental regimes.

Alexander Ovodenko and Robert Keohane's contribution reviews the growing literature on diffusion processes, which explains how environmental ideas and policies spread from one country or organization to another. In 'Institutional diffusion in international environmental affairs', the authors focus specifically on the diffusion of institutional innovations across different policy areas, a phenomenon that has received little attention in the literature to date. Ovodenko and Keohane set out an analytical framework that identifies the causal mechanisms behind diffusion processes and highlight the conditions that determine whether they work. Reviewing several cases of institutional diffusion which have achieved varying levels of success, they put forward a functional explanation that sees diffusion as a mimetic process, before discussing the role that other factors—state interests and power, ideas and private interests—play in diffusion processes.

In 'Engaging the public and the private in global sustainability governance', Kenneth Abbott asks why it is that debates within intergovernmental fora on how to improve global governance rarely address the growth in private governance. This public–private engagement gap is evident in the preparations for the Rio+20 conference. The author identifies key barriers that stand in the way of a closer engagement between the two strands and shows how states and international organizations could benefit from the governance innovations being developed by private actors. Abbott concludes with suggestions on how international organizations can improve this situation. Given the constraints within which they operate, international organizations should have recourse to coordination mechanisms, either in the form of 'regulatory cooperation', which allows them to influence the behaviour of private actors directly, or through 'orchestration' efforts, which rely on intermediary bodies as regulatory conduits.

Maria Ivanova, in contrast, focuses on the intergovernmental agenda of the Rio+20 conference. In 'Institutional design and UNEP reform: historical insights on form, function and financing', Ivanova reviews the preparatory negotiations on UNEP reform and finds that current debates largely mirror those of the early 1970s when UNEP was created. She urges policy-makers to learn the lessons of history and focus on the functions that the international environmental body can realistically be expected to perform. Her analysis thus runs counter to the widespread perception of UNEP as a weak and ill-designed international body. Ivanova concludes by arguing for a more modest institutional reform agenda, focused on strengthening the existing institution and improving its links with other elements of the UN system.

In their article on 'Complex global governance and domestic policies: four pathways of influence', Steven Bernstein and Benjamin Cashore examine how environmental policies effect change on the ground when the global governance

structures are complex and diffuse. Many pressing environmental problems are governed not by a single treaty but by an array of different mechanisms involving a variety of actors. In such cases, notions of 'regime effectiveness' are of little use, as Bernstein and Cashore argue, and we need to focus instead on the domestic influence of such complex governance mechanisms. The authors set out four different pathways through which actors and institutions seek to influence behaviour in a domestic setting.

Lavanya Rajamani concludes this special issue with an assessment of 'The changing fortunes of differential treatment in the evolution of international environmental law'. From the start of international environmental diplomacy in the early 1970s, developing countries have demanded differential treatment when it comes to specific legal obligations and international environmental aid. As the author demonstrates, they were successful in establishing, within the context of climate policy and elsewhere, the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities' and gained important concessions in a number of environmental regimes. This principle has come under attack, however, in recent years as the United States and other industrialized countries have challenged its application in the climate regime. Rajamani traces the evolution of this conflict and the gradual but seemingly unstoppable retreat of differential treatment in international environmental law.