

Designing a New Architecture for Global Environmental Governance

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The process of globalisation in the last decade has pointed to the increasing interdependence of the economies of the world and citizens of all nations. It has led to a growing recognition that countries need to find ways to work together to tackle shared challenges. Devised during the infancy of environmental awareness when problems were perceived as largely local, relatively distinct, and subject to technological fixes, the international environmental regime appears weak and fragmented and lacks adequate expertise, resources, authority, and legitimacy. The environmental challenges we now face, such as climate change, ozone depletion, ocean pollution, and natural resource exhaustion, clearly illustrate the extent of interdependence and interconnectedness of the fragile web of life that supports humanity's existence, and that needs a supportive socio-economic environment to achieve sustainability.

These problems demand collective action on a global scale. Yet there is no established and effective forum where parties can engage in a sustained and focused dialogue, identify priorities, and devise well-informed, commonly agreed action plans for tackling environmental concerns with worldwide implications. New institutional mechanisms for better global governance are urgently needed building on the capacities developed in the current system and suited to address the structural problems that the existing regime has encountered. Global governance, however, is NOT synonymous with 'government'. As the Commission on Global Governance defined it, governance is 'the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and co-operative action may be taken.'

Five major issues deserve particular focus:

- Failed collective action:** Current environmental problems demand collective action on a global scale. Governments, however, are faced with a difficult dilemma – environmental commitments entail short-term economic costs and a long-term commitment

while political capital and retention of power require immediate economic benefits. Moreover, the international environment of bargaining and co-operation is fraught with incentives for free-riding and shifting the burden of action onto others. A new mechanism for governance is needed that would alter the incentive structures and facilitate and enhance co-operation at the global scale.

- Fragmentation:** International environmental governance is shared among too many institutions with diffuse, overlapping, and even conflicting mandates. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) competes for time, attention, and resources with more than a dozen other UN bodies with environmental responsibilities and interests. Adding to this fragmentation are the independent secretariats to the numerous conventions. Currently, there exist over 500 multilateral environmental treaties. With such disparate entities focus is dissipated, efforts splintered, responsibilities scattered, funding squandered, and accountability lost.

- Deficient expertise:** Because of the fragmentation described above, relevant data is frequently lacking and problems that are ultimately global are addressed in a piecemeal

KEY CHALLENGES:

- The world's environmental challenges demand collective action on a global scale, yet the forum for developing such action is not yet strong and effective.**
- The 'centre of gravity' for environmental concerns is far weaker than other international regimes, notably those established for trade, health and labour.**
- The current fragmented governance regime has negative impacts on information management. Much remains to be improved in knowledge networking and sustainable development issues.**
- Disillusionment with the current global environmental regime and structures must be countered by commitments that build trust and legitimacy, and directly address issues of equity, trade & development.**

fashion. With independent programmes and secretariats using different data sets, it is difficult to compare problems or results and to build comprehensive programmes to address environmental issues. Knowledge networking, including collection and exchange of information on 'best practices', is necessary to increase the capability of all players.

- **Deficient authority:** The existing international environmental institutions, especially UNEP, are hampered by narrow or vague mandates, small budgets, and limited political support. No one organisation has the political authority, vitality, expertise, and profile to serve as the centre of gravity for the international environmental regime and exert sustained political influence in other global fora for decision-making. The contrast with other international regimes is striking, notably those established for trade, health and labour.

- **Insufficient legitimacy:** The international environmental regime has failed to deal adequately with the priorities of both developed and developing countries. Inattention on the part of industrialised countries to the need to build environmental capacities in developing countries through financial and technological transfers has resulted in a sense of disillusionment with the current global environmental regime and structures. Furthermore, principles of good governance such as representation, transparency, accountability, access to information and systematic conflict resolution have not been fully internalised by many of the international institutions with environmental responsibilities, undermining the legitimacy of the system as a whole.

Reform vision

The ultimate outcome of global environmental governance reform should be better management of our collective interdependencies – ecological, economic and social alike. To that end, equitable representation and participation of all interests, especially those of the weak and vulnerable sectors of society, is required within the institutional landscape for global governance. Strong economic institutions demand the existence of a solid environmental regime that could act both as a partner and as guardian of common interests and values.

A vision for a new architecture of environmental governance must include improved knowledge management, greater political space for civil society participation, collective action and collaboration among actors, binding commitments that ensure the building of trust among partners, and direct attention to equity, trade and development.

WSSD and global environmental governance

In his recent address to the General Assembly of the United Nations – postponed by nearly seven weeks due to the attacks of 11 September – Kofi Annan referred to four 'burning issues'. The Secretary General cited poverty, HIV/AIDS, conflict prevention, and environmental protection as issues that demand international resolve and action. In September 2002, Heads of State and a wide range of governmental, corporate, and civil society representatives will gather in Johannesburg at the World Summit on Sustainable

Development. Under the theme of 'people, planet, and prosperity', the Summit is expected to address the question of global environmental governance and institutional architecture. Finding multiple solutions to the problems of governing the global environment could provide the proving ground for new institutional mechanisms sensitive to issue imperatives, income disparities, socio-economic capacities, and political realities. The Johannesburg Summit thus offers the opportunity to make the first step of many in the direction of reshaping globalisation. If attained, co-operative resolution of environmental problems will provide a useful example for the more volatile issues of poverty, international security, and inequality in North/South relations.

What is necessary for Johannesburg is a thoughtful, analytically-grounded agenda for reform of the international environmental architecture developed through a sustained collaborative and inclusive process, grounded in the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development: ecological, economic and social. Any proposal for institutional and organisational reform should contain elements that address at least five critical questions:

1. Where has the existing environmental governance structure fallen short?
2. What are the critical functions of global environmental governance?
3. How can the requisite mechanisms to address these functions be constructed?
4. What models of success (and failure) are available?
5. What new and innovative approaches are necessary and feasible?

However, with only months until the Summit and without an official Summit agenda, the elaboration of such a reform proposal will border on the impossible. To avoid past mistakes of committing to lofty goals without implementation, the decisions at Johannesburg should focus on process rather than structures. Governments should commit to a series of structured and generative multi-stakeholder dialogues and deliberation processes which reach across nations and traditional sectoral and professional boundaries. Indeed, it is only new combinations of individuals and organisations building coalitions around the common good that will succeed in shaping the processes of globalisation constructively as well as ensure that democratic institutions are strengthened at the global level.

Conclusion

Good governance is a function of able leadership, effective collaboration, and strong political will. What gives us hope that reform of the international environmental architecture would enhance these features? Put simply, the answer is – 'the creation of a forum for their manifestation'. Leaders emerge when provided with the opportunity for expression of their aptitude; co-operation is meaningful when information is symmetrical and bargaining is possible; and political will comes forth when, in the words of Joan Martin Brown, 'enough people tell their governments: You Will!' ●