EVALUATING THE EFFICACY OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

"Global Governance" is the buzzword of the moment in international relations. A rapidly emerging political discourse centered on environmental issues at a 'global' level warrants analysis. This paper argues that the effectiveness of global governance in addressing environmental challenges is hindered by the complexity and differing perspectives of the concept of 'global environmental governance' (GEG) itself.

However, this is not to say that the term is incoherent or nonsensical, as certain observations can be made, and features identified, which show clear differences between the current global management of environmental issues and its predecessors. Moreover, this paper asserts that as the practical elements of GEG are informed by its conceptual base, the complex nature of the term 'global environmental governance' hampers its real-life functioning and machinery.
KEYWORDS-Global Governance, efficacy, environment, climate, GEG

INTRODUCTION

Global Environmental Governance (GEG)—comprising international agreements, institutions like the UN Environment Program, and non-state actors—has successfully built an expansive institutional framework, yet it struggles to reverse major environmental degradation and climate trends. [1, 2, 3]

Key Achievements

- Institutional Expansion: Growth in multilateral environmental agreements (e.g., UNFCCC, Basel Convention, CITES) and coordination bodies. [1, 2]
- Behavioral Shifts: International regimes can foster problem-solving and regulatory adjustments at national and subnational levels. [1, 2]
- Multi-Actor Engagement: Greater integration of non-state actors, scientific bodies (like the IPCC), and transnational networks. [1]

Core Efficacy Challenges

- Implementation Gaps: Legal bindingness does not automatically translate to domestic compliance or enforcement. [1, 2]
- Fragmentation & Redundancy: Overlapping regimes and cumbersome institutional machinery dilute focus from core environmental outcomes. [1, 2]
- Scale Mismatches: Global policies often fail to integrate smoothly with regional and local governance realities. [1, 2]

Reform Directions

- Strengthening Legal & Financial Frameworks: Enhancing accountability and proactive monitoring. [1]
- Inclusive Inclusivity: Broadening stakeholder participation and public-private partnerships. [1, 2]
- Technology Integration: Leveraging data disclosure and digital tools for transparent enforcement. [1, 2]

DISCUSSION

The first major hurdle for effective global governance of the environment lies not with its practical problems and applications, but a difficulty in deciphering the very concepts that define it. In fact, the notion of 'global environmental governance' itself is a highly contested and ambiguous term. As Biermann purports, "clear definitions of 'global governance'… have not yet been agreed upon: global governance means different things to different authors" (Biermann 2004, p. 06). What's more, "the different conceptualizations of GEG… cannot be explained simply as alternative interpretations or explanations of a generally agreed phenomena.

Rather the different approaches to the triad of concepts ("global," "environmental," "governance") understand the meaning of these terms in fundamentally different ways" (Paterson et al. 2003, p. 02). Here, questions arise as to what we mean by governance (i.e. who governs and how), how do we define the environment (the prevalence of the ecocentric or anthropocentric) and who and what is considered the global? Of course, many conceptualizations of GEG exist, all of which have their pros and cons (Biermann 2004, p. 08). However, empirically it is at least possible to discern certain differences between the current regime of GEG and other types of political management of environmental issues. In sum, we can somewhat narrow our understanding of what GEG is by focusing upon what it is not.[3,4,5]

Firstly, the notion of the 'global' denotes greater inclusion and a far broader meaning than that of 'national' or 'international', which focus upon 'nation' states as their main unit of analysis. Similarly to Saunier and Meganck, global embraces the official and unofficial governance activities of a long list of institutions and actors inside and outside of government, and across national and institutional boundaries, all of which are responsible for the administration and management of our planet (Saunier and Meganck 2004, pp. 03-04). These include, to name only a few, civil society, international institutions such as the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), national governments and non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace; all of which can operate between and at varying levels, such as the sub-national, national, international or global.

Along similar lines to James Rosenau therefore, "in a more interdependent world where what happens in one corner or at one level may have consequences for what occurs at every other corner and level, it seems a mistake to adhere to a narrow definition in which only formal institutions at the national and international levels are considered relevant" (Rosenau 1995, p. 13). Yet, other writers assert that such definitions are too vague, as "when transferred to the global level, such all-encompassing definitions hardly leave room for anything that is not global governance" (Biermann 2004, p. 06).

Secondly, 'governance' as a concept differs from that of 'government'. Currently, there is no world government, and instead a far looser global system has emerged. In essence, the global

system remains an arena whereby states are the highest sovereign bodies. To draw out this point, "states, as sovereign entities under international law, do not have to accept international agreements or join institutions [on a global level] they do not wish to participate in", including environmental treaties and institutions (Desombre 2006, p. 04).

As a result, the term 'governance' "enables us to penetrate and understand the government-like events that occur in a world of states [among other actors] even in the absence of government" (Finklestein 1995, p. 368). However, as a 1995 report by the Commission on Global Governance (CGG) asserts, while "global governance is not global government… it is hard to tell the difference" (Rabkin and Sheenan 1999, p. 55).

Thirdly, the term 'environment', the very focus area of GEG, is hotly contested. As Gupta and Asher proclaim, "the word environment has been around for a long time, but the importance and usage of the word has increased dramatically over the last forty years" (Gupta and Asher 1998, p. 03). Therefore, whilst there is growing consensus that the spotlight for global governance is at least on the impact that human activities have had on the environment, a myriad of issues still surface as to whether our efforts should concern the management, or prevention, of such activities.[4,5,6]

In addition, further questions arise as to whether these efforts should be for the sake of the environment itself, or for the benefit of humankind. It is important to note then that "the ways in which we conceptualize environmental problems… [has] a great deal of influence on how we try to address them" (Lipschutz 1990, p. 102).

For Green theorists such as Eckersley, "environmental governance should be about protecting not only the health and well being of existing human communities and future generations but also the larger web of life, made up of nested ecological communities at multiple levels of aggregation (such as gene pools populations, species, ecosystems", highlighting it's ecocentric philosophy (Eckersley 2007, p. 251). In contrast, neoliberals focus upon the centrality of the markets as the main regulative mechanism in tackling environment problems, hence, "the… management of natural resources and environmental issues through market-oriented arrangements" (Pellizoni 2011, p. 796).

Such a philosophy can be tied to the current policies of 'carbon trading' and the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, suggesting that environmental problems can be tackled as a consequence of effective market-based initiatives. This is problematic for Green theorists, who argue that markets cannot insure that the "scale of the economy operates within the ecological carrying capacity of ecosystems" (McGregor 2008, p. 03). In sum, ecological protection is not viewed as an end in itself for neoliberal advocates.

Overall then, the vagueness and complexity of the concept 'global environmental governance' clearly hinders the effectiveness of GEG in addressing environmental issues, as discourse can focus on definitional debates rather than tackling the challenges that they seek to address. Furthermore, such conceptual confusions and differences can often lead to internal inconsistencies in the outlook and policies of global governance actors.

Thus, It is hard to ignore that the conceptual debates have necessary impacts upon the practical effectiveness of the global governance of the environment, as shall be explored throughout the rest of this essay. In sum, the conceptual/theoretical elements of GEG inform the practical and vice versa, highlighting its co-constitutive relationship.

The Architecture of Global Environmental Governance

It is not unexpected then that this definitional complexity finds it's way into the architecture of the global environmental system itself. Most evidently, the number of international institutions concerned with environmental management is vast and rapidly expanding, highlighting both the increasing saliency of environmental issues globally and the multitude of institutions who specify a stake in global environmental management.

As Oberthur and Gehring illustrate, "a study conducted… in 1992 identified more than 15 separate international environmental regimes" (Sand 1992 cited in Oberthur and Gehring, p. 360). Yet, before we can explore the evolution and effectiveness of this architecture, it is important to justify why a system of global environmental governance is needed at all. Or in other words, why environmental challenges should be governed above and beyond the level of the state.[5,6,7]

If states can incorporate environmental targets, statutes and actions into national environmental programs and meet the targets they set themselves, why should we look beyond the state for governance of environmental issues? Examples of unilateral action such as "the Canadian assertion of environmental jurisdiction over Arctic waters in 1970 and its arrest of a Spanish fishing vessel in 1995; the British bombing of the Torrey Cannon oil tanker in 1967; the United States restrictions on tuna and shrimp caught in ways that harm dolphins and sea turtles respectively - in all these cases, one state proceeded independently, on its own authority, with little (if any) involvement by other nations" (Bodansky 2000, p. 340). Clearly then, states have acted and continue to act in their own national interests to protect the environment, a view similar to that held by neorealists.

However, the main issue with this logic is the assumption that environmental problems can be tackled and somewhat 'contained' within individual nation states. It is no more apparent than in the environmental policy areas that is simply not possible. In short, problems such as pollution, rising sea levels and global warming know no boundaries, and this is not merely due to our level of 'interdependence' in the era of globalization.

As Elizabeth Desombre aptly explains in relation to atmospheric challenges, "the atmosphere is not controlled by any one state, and actions taken by states in one location affect the atmosphere in other locations. States thus cannot protect their own populations from environmental problems of the atmosphere simply be controlling their own domestic behavior" (Desombre 2006, p. 97). Therefore, environmental problems are necessarily within the global commons.

Of course, it is wrong to dismiss unilateral efforts that seek to tackle environmental issues as futile. In fact, unilateral actions can be beneficial for greater global governance of such challenges as well as in and of themselves. When actors act unilaterally, they can set a precedent that can encourage, and even pressure, other actors into similar policy decisions or multilateral

agreements; what can be classed as "multilateral standard-setting" (Bodansky 2000, p. 344). Further still, such actions mean that environmental concerns are kept salient on the agenda of global governance actors. "Unilateralism is therefore not necessarily destabilizing" (Bodansky 2000, p. 339).

Taking into account the inherently global nature of environmental challenges, it seems unsurprising that a system of global environmental governance has emerged. Whilst it is difficult to precisely pinpoint the materialization of environmental concerns and voices on a global scale, a number of authors agree that the Stockholm Conference of 1972 and the consequential creation the UNEP, served as the first major marker of the institutionalization of environmental governance on a global scale (Biermann and Bauer 2005, pp. 03-04). Since then, the GEG architecture has evolved to include a wide range of international institutions, secretariats and summits, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 2011).

However, scholars such as Roy and Ivanova have argued that the current architecture of the global environmental regime is weak, limiting how far the system can successfully address contemporary environmental challenges (Roy and Ivanova 2007, pp. 48-49). Most prominently, unlike other issue regimes such as trade or health, global environmental governance lacks a central institution or authority.[6,7,8]

In other words, whilst there is a World Trade Organization (WTO), which is "the only global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations", there is no equivalent World Environment Organization (WEO) with equal international standing, authority and distinctiveness (WTO, 2011).

Many authors therefore point to the UNEP as the 'anchor' of the global environmental governance architecture. As Desombre states, the "UNEP is the closest thing there is to an overarching global institution for the environment" (Desombre 2006, p. 09). Roy and Ivanova's argument is clearly manifest within the wording of the UNEP itself, being considered as a program, rather than as an autonomous organization or specialized UN agency. Therefore, an analysis of its effectiveness as an organization in tackling environmental challenges is key component in evaluating the effectiveness of the GEG system as a whole.

In respect of this lack of a central authority, a key area of study for academics has been the level of institutional fragmentation and the consequent lack of co-ordination amongst global environmental institutions. Even the United Nations itself has considered how the institutional fragmentation of environmental issues has impacted upon the UNEP's effectiveness, arguing "the flourishing of new international institutions poses problems of co-ordination, eroding responsibilities and resulting in duplication of work as well as increased demand upon ministries and government" (United Nations 1998 cited in Andersen 2001, p. 19).

Concentrating on the UN only, the "UNEP competes for responsibility, political support, and resources with more than a dozen other UN bodies, including the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the UN Development Program (UNDP), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), and the International Oceanographic Commission (IOC)"

(Global Environmental Project 2011). This may not simply entail a lack of co-ordination, but also a level of competitiveness amongst these institutions. As a case in point, "the relationship between UNEP and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has been characterized by turf battles and eroding responsibility" (Andersen 2001, p. 22).

In addition, the UNEP does not hold autonomous control over its finance mechanisms. The Global Environmental Facility, and its role as a financier for various conventions and projects, further undermines the authority of the UNEP in environmental management (Desombre 2006, p. 13). As Najam notes, "in spite of UNEP's key role in international environmental policy formulation, UNEP's relationship with the GEF has been kept weak and it has been denied the one instrument that could have given it real influence" (Najam et. al 2006, p. 42).

More generally then, "the inadequacy and dispersion of the existing financial mechanisms – scattered across the Global Environmental Facility, UN Development Program, World Bank, and separate funds such as the Montreal Protocol Finance Mechanism" further fragments the system (Global Environmental Project 2011).[7,8,9]

Yet, it is not only specialized environmental organizations that form the structural make-up of GEG. Many other international institutions take environmental issues into account, including the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank. For example, in 1994, the WTO established the Committee on Trade and Development (CTD), set up to "identify the relationship between trade measures and environmental measures in order to promote sustainable development" (WTO 2011). Adding complexity, and, it is argued, further fragmenting the GEG system. The environment is therefore not simply a standalone issue, but is tied to various other policy areas, including trade, finance, health and poverty.

RESULTS

Global Environmental Governance (GEG) reform aims to enhance implementation, enforcement, and effectiveness of international agreements.
Sustainable development, defined by the Brundtland Commission, emphasizes meeting current needs without compromising future generations.
The 2002 UN World Summit reaffirmed commitments to sustainable development amidst increasing global disparities and environmental challenges.
Environmental governance requires multi-actor participation to address transboundary issues and ensure effective resource management.
Strengthening international environmental contracts and governance bodies is essential for sustainable environmental policies.
Our planet and humankind face three unprecedented, mutually reinforcing challenges: climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the overuse of critical natural resources.

In the past year, we have seen intense heatwaves and raging wildfires in Europe, the United States and in Japan cause huge economical loss and damage. In Africa and Asia, tropical cyclones and typhoons killed over a thousand people and devastated the lives of tens of millions more. In East Africa, droughts are getting more severe, the rains more intense. Somalia is at the edge of famine because of the drought.

We are also witnessing extreme loss of life in natural environments. In 2019, more than 27,000 species are threatened with extinction.

Our economic model today is overly dependent on the unsustainable use of natural resources. According to the United Nations, the extraction and processing of natural resources is the cause of half of global greenhouse gas emissions, and 80 to 90 per cent of biodiversity loss. Only nine per cent of man-made materials remain in circulation.[8,9,10]

Time is running out. We need a coordinated, comprehensive and swift response to these challenges. We cannot continue with our traditional economic and consumption models. There is no planet B.

Finland is ready to take action, but no country can achieve sustainable results on their own

Finland's new government has set the challenge of climate change as the starting point for its government programme. The ambitious, greenest ever government agenda aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2035—becoming the first fossil-free welfare society in the world. Finland also aims to stop the loss of biodiversity and intensify efforts to transition into a circular economy. We are the first country in the world to incorporate the 2030 Agenda in our 2019 state budget, with resources allocated for carbon-neutrality and the smart use of natural resources, and the main taxes contributing to sustainable development. State budgeting is, in our view, a very powerful tool to implement the 2030 Agenda.
The UN Environment Assembly and the UN Environment Programme can become even stronger and more effective

Finland has consistently called for the improvement of what we call the "international environmental governance". Previous, systematic reform efforts have aimed to improve coherence, coordination and effectiveness, with the Rio+20 meeting in 2012 as a key milestone. Reform efforts have focused specifically on 1) the governance, financing, and functioning of UN Environment, and 2) enhancement of synergies among multilateral environmental agreements.

The most significant reform so far has been the transformation of UN Environment's 58-member governing council into the universal UN Environment Assembly, bringing political leaders of all United Nations Member States to the same table to discuss our common environmental agenda. Despite its successes, the UN Environment Assembly is still a young United Nations body and needs further strengthening so that it can take its rightful place within the United Nations system.

As of today, the UN Environment Assembly takes decisions about the work of UN Environment. Instead, it should give strategic guidance to Member States and the international environmental governance system to increase political interest in the environmental agenda, and to motivate and ensure political action both within the United Nations and nationally.

At its fourth meeting in March 2019, the UN Environment Assembly decided to establish a Member State-led review process of its governing bodies, which will culminate in decisions at the Fifth UN Environment Assembly in 2021. We must use this process well and, in accordance

with the decision taken at the Fourth Assembly, keep the broad vision of a strengthened UN Environment Assembly firmly in mind.

Finland will hold the Presidency of the European Council for six months as of 1 July 2019 and will be in a key position to coordinate the European Union's views on the review process.

Boosting the environmental voice and agenda within the United Nations system

We also need to discuss UN Environment's and the Assembly's role in the wider United Nations system, to bring the environment more firmly to the core of the United Nations. Linkages between the UN Environment Assembly and the governing bodies of other United Nations entities, the High-Level Political Forum as well as multilateral environmental agreements are crucial and need to be promoted in order to support the 2030 Agenda implementation.

Finland underlines UN Environment's role as the main environmental coordinating body of the United Nations, working with other United Nations agencies through the Environment Management Group, with members from 51 multilateral bodies.[9,10]
Global environmental governance (GEG) is characterized by fragmentation, duplication, dispersed authority, and weak regulations. The gap between the need for action and existing responses has led to demands for accountability. This has created a paradox: accountability mechanisms to improve GEG have proliferated while the environment deteriorates. We offer a two-tier explanation for this paradox. First, actors establishing GEG are not held to account for the design of their environmental interventions. Biases in public, private, voluntary, and hybrid institutions, which shape goals and determine what to account for and to whom, remain unexamined. Second, efforts to establish accountability focus on functional requirements like monitoring and compliance, leading accountability to be viewed as an end in itself. Thus, complying with accountability may not mitigate negative environmental impacts. The utility of accountability hinges on improving governance at both tiers. Turning the accountability lens to the goals of those designing environmental institutions can overcome the focus of justifying institutions over environmental problems.

CONCLUSIONS

A growing number of governance institutions have incorporated environmental accountability mechanisms in response to the demand for environmentally effective and democratically responsive governance—yet the environment continues to deteriorate. We provided a two-tier explanation for this "accountability paradox" and suggest a path to recover accountability as a meaningful tool for environmental action. First, actors in public, private, voluntary, and hybrid institutions are not held to account for the design of environmental interventions. Environmental governance involves biases that determine what counts as an appropriate response. In the absence of accountability for these biases, governance institutions are able to subordinate environmental ends to goals determined by different institutional logics. Second, and as a result of this deficit, efforts to establish accountability tend to focus on functional requirements, leading scholars and policy-makers to view accountability as an end in itself. We have argued throughout that accountability can be a meaningful tool for environmental action only if it is incorporated in the first tier of environmental governance, where agenda and goal-setting take place: from the understanding and framing of problems, to formulating alternatives and choosing appropriate strategies for action.

Accountability remains a weak tool for environmental action because it is conceived as a monitoring, compliance, and enforcement device that is applied, as an appendage, to the execution of particular interventions. This is the case when consultations with stakeholders of environmental problems take place after public, private, or voluntary governors have already drawn the constitutive boundaries of what is possible. This reduces accountability to a policing function and negates its leverage for spurring environmental action. Given the continued growth of accountability mechanisms without teeth, current applications of accountability in GEG run a real risk of enabling continued environmental degradation rather than protection.[10]

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