
Global Public Policy Networks, International Organizations and International Environmental Governance¹

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I. Introduction

Since World War II, the transformation of the international system and the increasing number of problems of an international or even global magnitude have required the creation of a growing number of international institutions. Especially in the field of the environment, many governments have realized their inability to address transboundary environmental problems single-handed. Complex regimes evolved and international institutions aimed to ensure permanent cooperation, where periodic international conferences and other efforts were unable to settle issues. However, today these institutions are frequently accused of being unable to adequately absorb and respond to the new challenges of the global economic and social environment. National and cross-border liberalization, deregulation, integration, increased pollution, population growths and diseases like HIV/AIDS constitute a new dimension of challenge for the international community that requires innovative and new forms of cooperation and collaboration. For multilateral organizations it will therefore become critical to respond in a timely fashion to the challenges of a world characterized by a constant deepening of social and economic integration.

Much of these challenges can be absorbed with new and innovative institutional arrangements. Creative structures that link together not only different countries, but also different sectors such as governments, the private sector and civil society representatives, are needed to address global problems. In that sense, flexible and integrative networks may adapt existing hierarchical and sluggish structures to address international problems more quickly and effectively.

II. Problem

Although international activity in the field of the environment has constantly increased over the years, environmental destruction is continuing at a growing pace. The world's physical and biological systems are facing an unprecedented strain, while the availability of financial resources is declining. Today, in the run-up to the Earth Summit 2002, the international community is more than ever required to address environmental problems, continued sustainability, and sustainable development in a more coherent and coordinated manner. To this end, institutional arrangements have to be reviewed and the international architecture dealing with environmental issues must be strengthened.

Over the last decades the intergovernmental response to the growing environmental challenges has evolved as a complicated system of institutions, programs, and more of a dozen major treaty secretariats that grew like mushrooms around the globe. However, this system suffers considerable shortcomings and questions have increasingly arisen concerning the coordination of this multi-faceted institutional architecture. Institutions have often been created without due consideration of how they might interact with the overall system. As a consequence, the solutions provided to environmental problems from international environmental regimes as well as the architecture as a whole have fallen short of both expectations and needs.

In addition, growing international interdependence, increasing economic and political liberalization, and technological globalization have added special pressure to the international environmental governance system. Due to technological change and economic integration, transnational economic networks have grown that are difficult to regulate through national legislation or international treaties. Transnational corporations are increasingly important international players and have gained political leverage relative to states and international organizations. In the wake of economic, social as well as cultural globalization, integration of the private sector is crucial for effective solutions of international problems. At the same time, political liberalization as well as technological change has led to the rapid growth of what has come to be known as transnational advocacy coalitions. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are often committed to single policy issues and not only influence decisions of national governments very effectively, but also build international alliances. There are literally thousands of NGOs throughout the world working for environmental protection, who devote significant resources to create international networks and to launch international campaigns.

Therefore, governments and intergovernmental organizations can no longer afford to bypass non-governmental actors, represented through civil society groups or private companies. Furthermore, in order to reach sustainable policy solutions, international governance has to face the challenge to facilitate interaction, consultation and participation between international, national and regional actors.

III. Global Public Policy Networks

A new and innovative approach to global governance consists in the increasing number of Global Public Policy Networks (GPPNs). These ideally trisectoral networks are characterized by collaboration between governments, representatives of civil society and of the for-profit private sector. In the model case, they are inclusive towards the South and the North, and integrate international, regional, national and local actors.

In many cases, existing policy networks emerged in the shadow of traditional structures and started as social and organizational experiments. These networks are the response to an ever more complex social environment where traditional intergovernmental cooperation fails to find the right answer to transboundary and/or intersectoral problems. GPPNs are most likely to emerge in a situation of political deadlock. They can help to put issues on the international agenda and then kick off a discourse in which to debate that agenda. They include actors of different sectors and are typically organized in an informal or loosely structured framework that allows the network to learn and to adapt to a changing environment. Flexibility is crucial for the success of GPPNs.

The network structure is prone to fulfill different functions, such as facilitating international processes, structuring politically contentious multi-stakeholder relationships, setting global standards, disseminating of knowledge and addressing participatory short-comings. In doing so, they also address with the operational and the institutional gap two main weaknesses of the international environmental architecture.

IV. Examples for GPPNs

A. The World Commission on Dams (WCD)

The enormous investments and widespread impacts of large dams make the construction of large dams a highly controversial topic. Large dams bring together the entire set of issues that are central to conflicts over sustainable development, locally, nationally and internationally. Therefore, it became more and more difficult to reach agreement on the construction of large dams throughout the last decades and the number of such dams completed each year constantly declined. In the 1990s, stalemate had clearly begun to emerge between big dam opponents and proponents.

The WCD was established in 1998 to overcome this stalemate. The Commission was born out of a dialogue facilitated by IUCN and the World Bank, and consisted of 12 individuals that were chosen to reflect regional diversity, expertise and stakeholder perspectives.

The mandate of the WCD was very broad and inclusive. It was to undertake a global review of the development effectiveness of large dams and to develop internationally acceptable criteria and guidelines for future decision-making on dams. The WCD was independent, with each member serving in an individual capacity and not representing an institution or a country. The Commission conducted a comprehensive global review of the performance and impact of large dams. It held public consultations in all five continents and was funded by a new model involving public, private and civil society organizations. The Commission published its final report by the end of 2000.

Although it is too early to judge over the success of the WCD regarding its broad mandate, the final report drew widespread attention and is likely to have

created a—of course informal and not legally binding—standard against which future projects involving the construction of large dams will be measured. The example of the WCD shows the importance of inclusiveness, openness, and transparency as key principles for credibility throughout the process. In such a conflict-ridden area as the construction of large dams, trisectoral cooperation proved to be critical for the success of the Commission.

B. The Global Environment Facility (GEF)

The GEF provides funding for projects with global environmental benefits in developing countries and those with economies in transition. GEF finances are made available for investment and technical assistance in four focal areas—global warming, biodiversity, international waters, and ozone depletion. The responsibility for the implementation of projects for which the GEF provides financing is shared between UNDP, UNEP and the World Bank as implementing agencies.

In March 1991, the GEF was established as a pilot program. One and a half years later, when the GEF became the interim financial mechanism for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity, it underwent a complicated process of restructuring in order to integrate it into the more UN-driven Conventions. Through the process of restructuring, the GEF became more transparent, more democratic (with a double majority voting system), and more detached from the control of the World Bank. The new governance structure became an amalgam of UN and Bretton Woods institutions traditional features. Regime theory offers some insights about the emergence of the GEF as a hybrid, partially World Bank, partially UN institution, in terms of an extension of existing organizations and their rules and procedures. But this is not all. As a result of the negotiations, a new international entity was formed that links the different interests and stakeholder groups. The restructured GEF successfully learned from the pilot, adjusted the pilot to the Conventions, and bridged the Bretton Woods and the UN system.

Despite the fact that today's GEF is anything but perfect, its governance structure can serve as a role model for international cooperation in several ways:

- The GEF is the most transparent of all existing international agencies and the way it cooperates with civil society is surely a step ahead of other organizations. NGOs played a strong and important role during the foundation of the GEF. In that process and later on during the restructuring of the GEF, NGOs gave support to certain positions, facilitated coalitions as well as influenced the debate. Today the NGOs are partners in GEF project implementation. The GEF makes great use of the local presence and expertise of various NGOs, and the latter make use of resources provided by the former.

- The GEF is characterized by a strong ability to innovate, evolve and change. Soft law agreements dominate over legally binding treaties. The renunciation of binding and sometimes narrow legal structure enables and motivates the creation of new and innovative mechanisms like the GEF. These features make it flexible and able to innovate.
- The GEF governance structure is a unique example of how the different traditions of UN and Bretton Woods agencies can be brought together.

However, these strengths cannot disguise important flaws. These include the very limited integration of the private sector, the problem of asymmetry of power, and the operational complexity.

V. GPPN and Global Environmental Governance

The example of both the WCD and the GEF shows that participation of all stakeholders, flexibility and the ability to learn, as well as inclusiveness to all regions is crucial for the success of international cooperation. The experience of both cases depicts—however difficult it might be—the importance of bringing different actors and stakeholder together in an open and transparent process. Only if all involved actors, governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector build up ownership for the processes and its results, “sustainable” solutions in international politics can be found. In fact, the case of the WCD shows that truly trisectoral sourcing of knowledge is key for building consensual knowledge. The case of the GEF shows, that the linkage between different instruments and agencies, combined with a constant effort to seek the best compromise among all involved actors makes it able to serve as role model for alternative international governance structures.

The complexity of today’s problems and our fragmented world provides a strong argument for flexible and small institutions based more on a network of different stakeholders than on huge and new bureaucracies. In this context, the GEF and the WCD offer models of how modern governance structures could be shaped: on the basis of a minimum of formal agreements and founded more on compromise than legal precision. This openness in structure and regulation fosters a flexible agency with a strong ability to innovate. Constant evaluation and monitoring processes are crucial for this ability.

Network structures show alternatives in the international environmental architecture and can be used to promote dialogue and cooperation among different and divided actors.

GPPNs usually focus on specific, defined problems and reflect a variety of insights from game theoretic studies on the optimal number of parties to initial

an agreement or the optimal size for an organization in its early stages of development. In particular, as long as the number of involved parties is small at the beginning, parties can achieve an agreement that is more likely to be successful and sustainable than it would be if there were more parties involved, and that the validity of the agreement will persist even as more parties join. Small in this sense is not only beautiful, but also successful.

Networks ideally start with bringing together a handful of engaged, concerned, or affected people. Although this 'core' group and network might later evolve into more complex network structures, GPPNs usually have grown from the ground through a common vision of a limited number of key players. They tend to focus on clear defined problems, where they can deliver the goals set. These insights are supported by cooperation theory saying that it is important to start with the task that is easiest. As face-to-face interaction also increases people's ability to agree with one another, GPPNs can serve as forums to discuss international environmental problems. These forums are important to facilitate the process of reaching agreements between countries on measures that require international coordination. Networks also contribute to modern governance structures as they usually start informal but get formalized over the time. They are founded on the basis of a minimum of formal agreements and more on compromise than legal precision.

VI. The Role of International Organizations

GPPNs, however, are not self-standing and their emergence does not automatically declare redundant existing international structures. They usually do not provide a long-term forum for open-ended international cooperation on more general matters. The creation of dozens, and even hundreds, of GPPNs does not mean that traditional intergovernmental organizations will have to be downgraded to secondary players in international cooperation.

Provided that they manage to adapt to the new challenges of our interconnected world, traditional international organizations can take a crucial seat in promoting new governance structures: They can and should foster, encourage, and catalyze dialogue among stakeholders that need to cooperate in order to strengthen and launch more informal structures, such as networks. International organizations are often well placed to highlight and address critical challenges of environmental threats. They can play an intermediary role between states and business, as well as civil society. They also enjoy a comparative advantage in issues where conflicts arise across the North-South divide. Through capacity building and funding, they can enable more widespread participation in networks. Capacity building also proves to be critical when it comes to ensuring actual implementation of results. Eventually, it is relatively easy for these organizations to contribute substantially to processes of consensual knowledge-building in scientific and technical fields. Due to this privileged position, international

organizations are able to facilitate the creation of networks and can serve as a platform for convening networks.

Yet, existing international organizations have to implement some reforms in order to be able to fulfill their new role. Until now, international organizations' involvement in GPPNs has been more or less accidental and is not characterized by any strategic approach. In many cases different agencies and programs spend considerable time and resources in competing for funds and power.

In order to overcome these problems, international organizations should develop a strategy and vision on how to work in and with emerging and existing networks. They should set priorities first and then coordinate their approaches to ensure that activities of different agencies are not duplicating or even working cross-purposes. Agencies and programs should cooperate in a way that each of them brings its specific comparative advantage to progress.

A reform of the international environmental architecture can be built on new or existing structures. While the creation of a new global environmental organization might be considered by some the best long-term solution, it seems to be more realistic to concentrate our efforts on strengthening and streamlining the current structures. UNEP is the natural candidate of an organization that could serve as a hub for networks on environmental issues. Once it has identified international and strategic priorities, it could coordinate collaboration between different international, national, and regional actors. It should elaborate an overall strategy and coordinate the efforts of international organizations in participating in and building of networks. As a clearinghouse and a center for knowledge management it should also identify, strengthen, and build networks, it should coordinate their work and disseminate the lessons learned in networks around the world. Through capacity building activities and participatory as well as transparent processes it could ensure the inclusive participation in networks. UNEP would also fulfill a combination of a catalytic and agenda-setting role with actual program development and management.

Strong environmental governance structures, built on a set of networks, coordinated and put off the ground by international organizations, may close the participatory, the operational, and the institutional gap and lead to a more successful way to address the ever increasing environmental threats to our planet.

Literature:

I gained the insights reflected in this article through my work with Wolfgang Reinicke and his team in the "Global Public Policy Network Project" led by Wolfgang Reinicke and Francis Deng (see: www.globalpublicpolicy.net).

Among the flood of literature to global and international environmental governance, I would like to quote as references for my article:

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Endnotes:

¹ This article is based on the “Global Public Policy Network Project” led by Wolfgang Reinicke and Francis Deng. The project took place in 1999 and was sponsored by the UN Foundation. It aimed to provide strategic advice to the Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan. The results of the GPPN Project are captured in: Wolfgang Reinicke; Francis Deng, “*Critical Choices*, Ottawa 2000.

² The article represents the personal view of the author and should in no way be taken to represent the official view of any institution for which she works or with which she is associated.