2. Environmental policy development at the global level: Issues and prospects

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Abstract:

Due to the increased ecological crisis, there has been a corresponding spread of awareness and concern for environmental protection and conservation all over the world. There has been a growing recognition that many environmental problems, in particular, those of a trans-boundary nature, cannot be successfully tackled solely at the national level. Nation-states can no longer act alone to solve many of the environmental problems that they face. States, along with other international actors, have responded by creating international 'regimes' in an attempt to tackle problems ranging from ozone depletion and climate change to biodiversity loss and toxic waste exports (Connelly, J., Smith, G., Benson, D., & Saunders, C., 2012, p.250). The idea of global environmental governance took place to address the environmental challenges at the global platform.

The idea of environmental governance is to govern the environment through a range of nation-states and non-state actors such as national governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other international organizations such as UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme). Environmental governance is the answer to calls for new forms of environmental challenges and complexities. It is perceived to be an effective form of multilateral management and essential to the global community in meeting goals of mitigation and the possible reversal of the human impacts on the global environment. The present article discusses the global response to environmental issues.

Keywords:

Environmental; Policy; Development; Ecological; Governance

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Environmental Policy initiative at the global level

The Stockholm Conference (1972)

The year 1972 is a significant year in the history of Environmental Governance. The United Nations Conference on Human Environment held in 1972 at Stockholm, the Capital of Sweden, turned out to be a watershed event in the recognition of environmental challenges by the international community. Attended by the representatives of 114 countries, the Conference provided the first major international opportunity for the South to highlight the links between the prevailing international economic system, environmental degradation and poverty. As host, Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in his speech also openly criticized the industrialized world for its ecological and economic exploitation, causing the world's greatest environmental problems at the expense of developing countries. While his critique was emblematic for the general tensions between developed and developing countries, which continued throughout the conference, the participants reached an unprecedented level of agreement. The conference declared 26 guiding principles aimed at reducing human impacts on the environment, accompanied by a related 'Plan of Action'(Connelly et al., 2012, p.266). The conference not only established a remarkable Declaration of Principles but also came up with the necessary institutional arrangements for international cooperation in environmental protection. The most important outcome being the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, and headed by Mauris Strong, who was the chief facilitator of the first international conference on the environment. This development is significant as it was for the first time recognized by the international community that the mother earth is in danger and collective efforts are required to take care of it.

The UN Conference on Human Environment (UNCHE) was a turning point in the evolution of humanity's relationship with the earth and global concern about the environment. While most of the conference's accomplishments were mainly rhetorical, its ultimate success was that environmental policy became a universal concern within international diplomacy, and the conference's motto of "Only one Earth" became iconic for the modern environmental movement. UNCHE not only established a remarkable Declaration of Principles but also came up with the necessary institutional arrangements for international cooperation in environmental protection. The most important outcome was the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). What further set the Stockholm summit apart from former UN conferences was the amount of popular interest and civil society actors' participation. Sweden's quest for an open and inviting conference setting, which broke with traditionally rigid UN formats, opened the way for civil actors to raise their own concerns about the environment. Accordingly, the number of activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that attended the events in and around the conference was unprecedented. Through the Environment Forum, as well as through demonstrations and petitions, activists and NGOs opened up the dialogue about the various environmental and development issues and tried to influence the conference delegates.

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987)

By the 1980s, there was a realization among the international community that the economic model of development they are following is primarily responsible for environmental degradation. But, the dilemma was that the nations, especially the developing nations needed economic growth to remove poverty and reach a level of prosperity. In an effort to get around the economic-environment paradox, in 1987 the UN General Assembly authorized the establishment of a World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, which produced the report 'Our Common Future', identifying sustainable development as the solution. Sustainable development reconciled environmental and economic interests by

framing them as interdependent (Hough, Peter, 2014, p.12). Sustainable development, according to the Brundtland report, 'is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs' (Imperatives, S., 1987, p.41). This definition emphasized the mutual reinforcing of economic growth, social development and environmental protection, putting a forceful case forward for a higher level of multi-lateral cooperation and the need to reform economic practices such as trade, finance and aid. The Report assumed that we can continue on the path of economic development and yet leave enough resources behind for future generations. Thus, sustainable development is about promoting social justice, equity, cultural diversity and protecting the ecology. It is aimed at harmonizing the economic, social, cultural and environmental factors. It can be referred to as development that is equitable, harmonious and balanced. Though it has a different meaning for different people and has many expressions, a general understanding is that it is a development, which is equitable, self-reliant, eco-friendly, economically viable and long-lasting. Thus, sustainable development suggests that the present resources should be utilized in a judicious way so that they can also be utilized by future generations. In that way, it tries to ensure inter-generational equity and justice.

The Brundtland Report changed the discourse of global environmentalism. It tried to chart a middle ground between the North and the South and between market-liberal and institutionalist views on growth on the one hand and social green and bio-environmentalist views on the other. It proposed a global development and environment strategy designed to be palatable to all. It did not see further economic growth and industrialization as necessarily harmful to the environment and thus did not foresee any necessary 'limits' to growth. At the same time, it argued, very much in line with the Third World sentiments at Stockholm, that poverty harmed the environment as much as industrialization. This poverty was in large part due to the place of developing economies within the global structure. The best way to move forward, the report contends, was to promote economic growth-not the kind of growth seen in the 1960s and 1970s, but environmentally sustainable growth (Clapp, J., & Dauvergne, P., 2011, pp.60-61). Thus, the Brundtland report provided a balanced approach to

harmonize relations between environment and development as well as between developed and developing countries.

Earth Submit (1992)

The Brundtland Report prompted the UN General Assembly, in 1989, to approve a follow-up conference in Stockholm in 20 years' time to flesh out the concept of sustainable development. Thus, in 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), known as the Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro. The Rio declaration contains 27 principles on how nations should conserve the environment. It talks about the reduction in the greenhouse gases by conservation of biodiversity and forest resources. The conference also brought a blueprint of action plan known as Agenda 21 to achieve the goals of sustainable development. It contains 40 chapters divided into 4 sections: Social and economic dimension, conservation and management of resources for development, strengthening the role of major groups, means of implementation. It is an action agenda for the UN, other multilateral organizations, and national governments around the world that can be implemented at local, national, and global levels.

The Rio Earth Summit was unprecedented in terms of both its size and the scope of its concerns. Twenty years after the first international environment conference, the UN sought to assist Governments to rethink economic development and find ways to halt the destruction of irreplaceable natural resources and pollution of the planet. The Summit's message — that nothing less than a transformation of our attitudes and behaviour would bring about the necessary changes — was heard by millions around the world. The message reflected the complexity of the problems facing us: that poverty, as well as excessive consumption by affluent populations, place damaging stress on the environment. Governments recognized the need to redirect international and national plans and policies to ensure that all economic decisions fully took into account any environmental impact[3]. The Earth Summit also influenced all subsequent UN conferences, which have examined the relationship

between human rights, population, social development, women and human settlements — and the need for environmentally sustainable development.

Kyoto Protocol (1997)

The most well-known of the treaties negotiated in the years following the Earth Summit (1992) is the Kyoto Protocol (1997) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The protocol called for individual commitments by industrial nations to reduce emissions of six greenhouse gases by 2008-12, which were expected to lead to an overall reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to levels 5 per cent below of 1990 levels by 2008-12, the so-called first commitment period (Speth, J. G., & Haas, P. M., 2007, pp.74-75).

Under the Protocol, nations must meet their targets primarily through national measures. However, the Protocol also offers them an additional means to meet their targets by way of three market-based mechanisms, viz.: International Emissions Trading, Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and Joint Implementation (JI). The mechanisms help to stimulate green investment and help Parties meet their emission targets in a cost-effective way.

There also appeared a dispute between the developed and the developing nations on the cut in the level of emissions. The developing nations were of the opinion that their economic conditions do not allow them to follow the Protocol. They also stressed that their level of consumption and emissions are much lower in comparison to the developed nations. Despite these differences, the Kyoto Protocol is seen as an important first step towards a truly global emission reduction regime that would stabilize GHG emissions and can provide a foundation for the future international agreement on climate change.

World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002)

The United Nations called for a new submit to review the commitments of Rio and to rekindle fresh political and financial commitments for Sustainable development. As a result, the World Summit on Sustainable Development was held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002, 10 years after the Rio Earth Summit. The conference was the biggest UN meeting ever. Over 180 nations and 100 heads of States attended the conference. The major outcome document, the Plan of Implementation, contains targets and timetables to spur action on a wide range of issues, including access to clean water, proper sanitation, preserving bio-diversity, phasing out of toxic chemicals, increasing the use of renewable energy. However, the conference failed to embrace new verifiable goals or to advance significant efforts for the protection of the global environment. Unlike its predecessor, it was primarily concerned with implementation rather than with new treaties and targets. While relatively modest in its achievements, and with difficulties in achieving consensus in key areas such as energy, trade, finance and globalization, the summit nevertheless succeeded in placing sustainable development back on the political agenda, giving new impetus, in particular to the environment and development needs of the third world nations like Africa, with a strong focus on local issues like household energy, water and sanitation. Health was singled out as one of five priority areas, along with water, energy, agriculture and biodiversity, and was devoted a separate chapter in the resulting Plan of Implementation, which highlighted a range of environmental health issues as well as issues relating to health services, communicable and non-communicable diseases (Von Schirnding, Y., 2005, pp.1). Thus, the greatest achievement of the UN Summit was that it brought together governments, the private sector and civil society to discuss and formulate a new global deal on sustainable development.

UN Conference on Sustainable Development (2012)

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20) was held 20–22 June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The conference was intended to bring together representatives from countries,

non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other stakeholders in order to discuss the progress which has been made and the challenges still apparent since the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 20 years earlier. Prior to the conference, two themes were developed which were meant to be the main focus of the conference, namely: a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and the institutional framework for sustainable development. The main three objectives of the Ri+20 Conference were:

- to secure a renewed political commitment for sustainable development,
- to assess the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development, and
- to address new and emerging challenges (Pisano, U., Endl, A., & Berger, G., 2012, pp.19).

In Rio, Member States decided to launch a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will build upon the Millennium Development Goals and converge with the post-2015 development agenda.

The Conference also adopted ground-breaking guidelines on policies. Governments also decided to establish an intergovernmental process under the General Assembly to prepare options on a strategy for sustainable development financing. Governments also agreed to strengthen the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on several fronts with action to be taken during the 67th session of the General Assembly. They also agreed to establish a high-level political forum for sustainable development. In order to ensure compliance with the agreements at Rio, delegates also agreed to establish the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD).

In 2013, the CSD was replaced by the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development that meets every year as part of the ECOSOC meetings, and every fourth year as part of the General Assembly meetings. The outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, entitled "The future we want", enumerated 283 principles, called 'Our common vision'.

United Nations Conference on Climate Change (2015):

The United Nations Conference on Climate Change held in Paris, France, from 30 November to 12 December 2015 is another landmark in the international commitments for environmental governance. It was the 21st yearly session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 11th session of the Meeting of the Parties to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. The conference negotiated the Paris Agreement, a global agreement on the reduction of climate change, the text of which represented a consensus of the representatives of 197 parties attending it. The agreement will become legally binding if joined by at least 55 countries which together represent at least 55 per cent of global greenhouse emissions. Such parties will need to sign the agreement in New York between 22 April 2016 (Earth Day) and 21 April 2017, and also adopt it within their own legal systems (through ratification, acceptance, approval, or accession).In the 12-page document, the members agreed to reduce their carbon output "as soon as possible" and to do their best to keep global warming "to well below 2 degrees C". The agreement establishes a "global stocktake" which revisits the national goals to "update and enhance" them every five years beginning 2023. However, no detailed time-table or country-specific goals for emissions were incorporated into the Paris Agreement – as opposed to the previous Kyoto Protocol(IISD). Though the Conference could not achieve its desired objectives, however, it showed the consistent concern of the international community to protect the environment by their collective efforts. On 5 October 2016, the threshold for entry into force of the Paris Agreement was achieved as 133 Parties ratified the Convention. The Paris Agreement entered into force on 4 November 2016 which for the first time – brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects, with enhanced support to assist developing countries to do so[4]. As such, it charts a new course in the global climate effort.

United Nations Climate Change Conference (2019):

The 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference was held in Madrid, Spain, from 2 to 13 December 2019 under the presidency of the Chilean government. The conference incorporates the 25th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the 15th meeting of the parties for the Kyoto Protocol (CMP15), and the second meeting of the parties for the Paris Agreement (CMA2). The results of the conference were disappointing. Greenpeace executive director Jennifer Morgan summarized the prevalent opinion: "Climate blockers like Brazil and Saudi Arabia enabled by irresponsibly weak Chilean leadership, peddled carbon deals and steamrolled scientists and civil society."[7] The decisions about the carbon market and emissions cut were delayed to the next climate conference in Glasgow. United States, Russia, India, China, Brazil, Saudi Arabia were the main opponents of these measures. So, no concrete outcome came out of the Climate Change Conference.

It is evident from the above discussion that since the beginning of the international environmental regimes the developing countries perceived the global environmental agenda as an agenda of the rich industrialized nations. Therefore these concerns were given a very low priority by the developing nations as they feared that such accords would undermine their economic growth and prosperity. Due to such apprehensions, they always insist on regulating the industrialized nations first. This conflict can be resolved by giving attention to the points made by Anil Agarwal, one of India's leading environmental advocate. He argues that 'the issue of equity has become a very contentious one in environmental diplomacy. Equity is a prerequisite for a global agreement, and environmental cooperation can only be possible through solutions that are both equitable and 'ecologically effective'. These negotiations throw up major political challenges for the people of the world…enhancing sustainability is the ultimate purpose of these negotiations, but without an equitable framework, they are unlikely to generate sufficient confidence and willingness to participate across the world' (Speth, J. G., & Haas, P. M., 2007). Thus, giving recognition to the

aspiration and needs of the third world nations is a prerequisite for making the global environmental treaties a success.

Concluding Observations

The variety of environmental changes generated by human activities, from the local to the global levels, are not new. However, the magnitude of the diverse changes and the resulting impacts on the functioning of the natural eco-systemic processes grew very rapidly over the past two centuries, and more so in the second half of the last century. The Stockholm Conference on Human Environment in 1972 turned out to be a watershed event in the recognition of the environmental challenges by the Global community. Since then, the environment got increasingly internalized in the governance agenda at all spatial levels of governance. Thus, the journey of green governance has travelled from Stockholm (1972) to Paris (2015) in a hope to collectively address environmental challenges. A number of international conferences and summits have taken place during this period.

However, the international community has not been able to achieve its desired goals. There are two barriers in the way. First, there is a conflict of interest between the developed and the developing countries. Second, the global policy stands in stark contrast to domestic environmental laws, which results in the non-implementation of international commitments. Governments are still prone to take blinkered decisions informed by short-term economic interest in the face of epistemic consensus and longer-term utilitarian calculations of 'national interest', as has most clearly been seen in the US's stance on climate change (Hough, P., 2014, p.16). Due to these reasons, environmental governance at the global level is far from meeting its imperative goals.

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