UN Conferences and
Constructivist Governance
of the Environment

Peter M. Haas

In this article I review the history of global environmental conferences and draw political lessons about their broader role in constructing efforts at global environmental governance. I also examine the future of global conference diplomacy for the environment, in particular Rio+10 in Johannesburg in 2002 and the prospects of reaching the goals for sustainable development set at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Global conferences are oft-used policy instruments, thus deserving careful evaluation and assessment. Jacques Fomerand expresses justifiable skepticism that most global conferences are momentary media events that provide sound bite opportunities without lasting effects on policies or the quality of the environment. Guilio Gallarotti, and Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, offer similar skeptical judgments about the potential for effective state-based international governance. Yet Fomerand also points out, as do I, that many conferences provide indirect effects that may be beneficial for inducing states to take more progressive steps toward governance and sustainable development.

Governance and Constructivism

Governance has recently become a popular catchphrase of international relations. Without the prospects of hegemonic leadership, and in light of the substantial growth of influence of international institutions and non-state actors, international rule making has become the domain of multiple overlapping actors and regimes, rather than the clearcut leadership by one state or multilateral conformity with a small and homogeneous set of shared rules backed by enforcement mechanisms. Anne Marie Slaughter defines it as “the formal and informal bundles of rules, roles and relationships that define and regulate the social practices of states and nonstate actors in international affairs.” Sustainable development
requires multilateral governance, because without well-defined rules and expectations most countries are incapable of unilaterally protecting themselves from transboundary and global environmental risks.

Constructivist scholars of international relations (IR) have been focusing on the institutional, discursive, and intersubjective procedures by which international governance develops. John Ruggie writes that

social constructivism rests on an irreducibly intersubjective dimension of human action... constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life... Constructivists hold the view that the building blocks of international reality are ideational as well as material; that ideational factors have normative as well as instrumental dimensions; that they express not only individual but also collective intentionality; and that the meaning and significance of ideational factors are not independent of time and place.\(^4\)

Constructivists look at the mechanisms and consequences by which actors, particularly states, derive meaning from a complex world, and how they identify their interests and policies for issues that appear new and uncertain.

It is now widely accepted by most IR scholars that governance increasingly occurs in a decentralized manner, through a loosely tied network of multiple actors, states, functional state agencies, and nonstate actors who interact frequently, sometimes at global conferences.\(^5\) Governance of the environment is no different.

Constructivists focus on such distinctive processes as socialization, education, persuasion, discourse, and norm inculcation to understand the ways in which international governance develops. Typically these are complex procedures involving multiple interacting actors that accrue over time and contribute to transformational shifts in perceptions of national identity, international agendas, and the presumptive ways by which national interests are to be attained.

UN conferences contribute to governance and sustainable development by establishing and reinforcing some of these constructivist themes in international relations. As I argue in greater length below, international conferences seldom have direct causal influences on member states' behavior, but their outputs are part and parcel of this broader process of multilateral governance and may contribute to stronger and more effective environmental governance by states.

Accumulated global environmental conferences over the last thirty years have contributed to an aggregate shift in international politics by extending participation and access to environmental diplomacy to
national environmental agencies and to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and networks of scientists—a process that Fomerand describes as a "large-scale process of social mobilization." Over the last thirty years, governments have added the inspirational norm of ecological integrity to the traditional goals of wealth and power.

The most successful conferences have promoted broader processes of social learning and the construction of new, more comprehensive conceptual frameworks for global environmental governance through issue clarification, popularization of issues, and the introduction of new environmental policymaking approaches to governmental officials. Through this institutionalized constructivist process of participation and education, new norms for environmental protection have been diffused, and participating states have been encouraged to endorse them and to apply them nationally. Gradually, many of these norms have been converted to new institutionalized practices by states. Many states were socialized to appreciate new styles of understanding of relations between economics and ecology and were encouraged to apply new policies to achieve economic development that is more environmentally sustainable than past doctrines. Global environmental conferences have contributed to aggregate substantive changes in environmental governance. The Founex preparations for the UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) contributed to transcending the environment/development dichotomy in the framing of international environmental policy. As scientific consensus has crystallized around comprehensive forms of ecological management doctrines, the frames and dominant discourses of the environmental conferences have shifted from concern about resource scarcity and depletion to efforts to understand and protect ecosystem integrity. The new consensus over sustainable development that was forged at the 1994 population conference in Cairo states that population growth cannot be considered in isolation of social issues shaping family planning choices, such as women’s roles in society, a clear example of the development and application of a new policy discourse at an international conference.

Later, UNCED’s Agenda 21 was organized and designed around a matrix of issues, so that policies would be developed to address the interconnections between human activities (industry, agriculture, styles of decisionmaking, consumption patterns, technology) and the environment, as well as between global ecosystems (the atmosphere, freshwater, oceans, land) with chapters of Agenda 21 designed to capture the intersections located in each cell of the matrix. The earlier UNCHE framework was organized around the more traditional tripartite
administrative framework of environmental assessment (evaluation and review, research, monitoring, information exchange), environmental management (goal setting and planning, international consultation and agreements), and supporting measures (education and training, public information, organization, financing, technical cooperation). This had the effect of establishing programs and activities that were not administratively associated with the specific functional issue or international problem that justified their creation. Environmental monitoring, for example, would be a free-standing activity, unrelated to the specific contaminants warranting monitoring. Similarly, problems were defined in isolation, and management responses were associated with each distinct problem. While UNCHE was organized around a conceptual framework of traditional administrative functions, UNCED was set up to capture the newly appreciated analytic attributes of the issues being addressed.

Thus, internationally endorsed policies and responses were designed to address the interplay of environmental problems, including their underlying causes. At UNCED, problems were delimited in terms of the interacting array of social forces that caused them, and thus policies were designed to address the social causes—in contrast to the UNCHE approach, which devised a standard set of monitoring and administrative reforms for problems that were addressed individually and outside of their social context.

Consequently, when combined with the other array of institutional and participatory reforms introduced at various UN environmental conferences over the last thirty years, these new frameworks and agendas have led to a much broader shift in discourse, as new institutions were established to address the new policy components of the agenda. These institutions also serve to popularize the language and policy ingredients for the policy communities worldwide.

Ultimately, international conferences are weak institutional features of international relations that lack many of the properties that constructivists expect to contribute to transformed state beliefs and practices. Constructivists have identified a number of institutional design features that may induce states to recognize new interests and embark upon new patterns of practice. Notable among these features are iterated interactions, autonomous secretariats staffed with professionals recruited on merit, independent and capable executive heads, free and easy access to independent experts, significant institutional resources for carrying out meaningful technological and resource transfers, and adequate institutional budgets. Few international conferences are endowed with these
properties by sponsoring states. The most successful conferences emerged from repeated preparatory meetings; were supported by secretariats recruited on merit, led by adroit and experienced UN diplomats, such as Maurice Strong; maintained a porous flow of information with independent experts outside the UN system; and had sufficient resources to support the preparations. Few international conferences had the ability to provide resource transfers to encourage states to participate, although some of the more successful conferences created institutions that had that capability.

Governments generally follow the preparatory activities to ensure that they are not confronted with any unpleasant political surprises at the actual conferences. Because they are one-time events, there is limited access to top-level officials, and it is difficult to maintain long-term pressure on governments through national reporting, information circulation, oversight, or lobbying. Thus, it is difficult for transnational policy networks to organize and consolidate influence through global environmental conferences. Global environmental conferences usually lack significant political or financial resources for inducing change on states and lack any lock-in mechanisms by which decisions become deeply institutionalized within the legal and political systems of attending countries. Occasionally, though, some conferences are able to generate significant outputs or mobilize individual forces that have long-term repercussions internationally.

UN conferences, though, are quite different from the G-8 summits in this regard. Unlike the one-shot nature of UN conferences, the G-8 summits are part of smaller institutionalized discussions among trade and finance ministers and bureaucrats, who maintain frequent interactions at G-8 summits, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) working groups, International Monetary Fund (IMF) working groups, Bank for International Settlements (BIS) working groups, and private conferences. Unlike these small ongoing private group meetings, UN conferences enjoy greater and broader political legitimacy by virtue of their universal representation and the opportunity for middle-level powers and small powers to have a say.

The effects of the most successful conferences have been to increase national concern and to increase government capacity to address problems politically and technically by means of agenda setting, consciousness raising, expanded participation, monitoring, knowledge generation and diffusion, target setting, norm development and diffusion, and administrative reforms. In addition, they have helped to channel financial, technological, and scientific resources to needy countries.
The UN Conferences on the Environment

Global UN conferences on the environment are widely understood as an institutional innovation of the 1970s. With mounting concern about the degradation of the physical environment, governments approached the UN to convene a number of global conferences to address the host of human activities with transboundary and global environmental consequences. These environmental conferences became part of a broader effort at global problem solving that addressed a new class of challenges associated with international interdependence. As global interdependence became increasingly politicized in the 1970s, the UN system turned to global conferences to highlight the interconnections between issues that had previously been treated in isolation. The topics of the global conferences were new to the international agenda, as previous multilateral conferences had principally addressed issues of international economics, human rights, and arms control. The UN, as the only venue with global participation, was the logical forum for such meetings.

The 1972 UNCEH and the 1992 UNCED directly addressed the subject of environmental protection, but special UN conferences devoted to different aspects of human impact on the environment became commonplace in the 1970s. The frequency of such global conferences diminished in the 1980s and 1990s. What has remained constant are the decadal meetings of conferences on population, women, and food, as well as the follow-up annual reviews on UNCED commitments and the more comprehensive and high-profile UNCED+5 meeting in 1997 and the UNCED+10 meeting to be held in 2002.

These global conferences performed multiple functions. They were intended to mobilize concern about new problems, to coordinate national actions to study and monitor environmental quality and human activities with environmental consequences, and to develop joint measures to prevent various sources of environmental degradation and attenuate the effects of human actions on the environment. Economic and equity concerns cut across most of the other specialized conferences.

Typically a conference lasts for several weeks, with high-level diplomatic attendance during the last two or three days to overcome political deadlocks and to sign legally binding resolutions and other commitments developed at the conference. Decisions are generally reached by consensus, so negotiations are slow. Preceding a conferences, though, are often several rounds of ad hoc Preparatory Committee sessions ("Prep Coms"), often spread over one to two years, at which national delegations are presented with background papers and preliminary
negotiations are conducted on the documents intended for approval at the conference. Most of the arduous work of reconciling political differences occurs during the Preparatory Committee sessions.

Generally the global UN conferences on the environment have produced declarations and action plans for subsequent activities. The most influential conferences endorsed new policy doctrines and policy targets for the international community, authorized the creation of new international organizations, approved legal commitments, and generated new financial resources. The most productive, in terms of their administrative accomplishments, have been UNCHE, the 1974 World Food Conference, UNCED, and the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. Others, such as the 1977 Conference on Desertification, the 1979 Conference on Science and Technology for Development, and the Conferences on Human Settlements, have failed to spark international concern or to catalyze robust international commitments and action.

The 1972 UNCHE, held in Sweden, was the first major global environmental conference. Sponsored by the UN, it convened 113 countries to discuss contemporary environmental issues. UNCHE adopted the Stockholm Declaration, establishing twenty-six principles of behavior and responsibility to serve as the basis for future legally binding multilateral accords; and the Action Plan for the Human Environment that specified 109 recommendations in the areas of environmental assessment, environmental management, and supporting institutional measures. Implementation was intended for governments and international organizations (IOs).

The 1992 UNCED, held in Rio de Janeiro, marks the high-water mark of these outputs. UNCED adopted the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Statement of Forest Principles. In addition to those three pieces of hard law, UNCED adopted the Rio Declaration, with 287 principles of guiding action, and Agenda 21, a sweeping action plan to promote sustainability, with 2,509 specific recommendations applying to states, international institutions, and members of civil society. The Commission on Sustainable Development was created to ensure effective follow-up of UNCED; to enhance international cooperation and rationalize intergovernmental decisionmaking capacity; and to examine progress in Agenda 21 implementation at the local, national, regional, and international levels.

The variation in the degree of influential outputs from conferences is due to a number of factors. The more productive conferences were free of profound political schisms or geopolitical tensions among major parties, including Cold War tensions. The environment was not nested
in a politically irreconcilable frame of profound North-South cleavages. The issue at hand appealed to the immediate interests of the industrialized countries because of either popular concern within the countries or perceived linkages between the subject and material national interests, leading major donor states to commit resources to the issues. Robert Putnam and Nicholas Bayne inferred a number of similar background conditions from successful G-7 summits.16

UNCHE, for instance, was held at a fortuitous moment. Domestic environmental movements were just becoming active in the United States and Europe. Potential North-South disagreements were avoided by prior high-level discussions that rejected the conceptual dichotomy between economic growth and environmental protection; extended the international agenda to include environmental concerns of the South regarding natural resource policy as well as the pollution concerns of the industrialized countries; and provided a notional commitment to "additionality" and financial assistance on behalf of the North.17 Environmental protection was not seen as inconsistent with other established goals in international negotiations, including national security and economic liberalization. UNCHE also provided the first opportunity, following U.S. recognition, for China to stake out a position in international diplomacy. North-South relations became more acrimonious with the New International Economic Order (NIEO) discussions in the late 1970s, making it harder to forge consensus at international conferences. Even with these factors, Cold War divides still modestly influenced the conference, as the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries withdrew at the last minute over the participation of West Germany; yet, because the superpowers were in a period of détente, such tactical linkages were not perceived as provocative and freighted with Cold War significance.

**Effectiveness of International Conferences**

It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of many of these conferences, in part because of weaknesses and gaps in our ability to monitor progress in achieving conference goals. The record is generally mixed, at best, in terms of achieving the targets and aspirations expressed in the action plans and declarations of the conferences. It is difficult to measure directly the effects on the environment, and the record of states in complying is mixed or uncertain. The goals are often ambiguous. State reporting about compliance is generally weak and incomplete, and few provisions for verification of state compliance are made at the conferences. Most assessments of conference successes remain impressionistic
and anecdotal, although some conferences generated new doctrinal consensus or new institutions to help advance the conference goals (such as UNCHE, with the UN Environment Programme [UNEP]; the 1974 World Food Conference, with the World Food Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD]; the 1994 World Population Conference, with its strong endorsement of new population policy albeit without strong institutional support; and UNCED, with its support for the new doctrine of sustainable development but still with a weak Commission on Sustainable Development). At UNCED+5 the General Assembly and the Commission on Sustainable Development tried to evaluate overall progress achieved since UNCED. It determined, among many observations, that production and consumption patterns had become more energy efficient in industrialized countries; that land use conflicts were more acute in developing countries between competing demands for agriculture, forest cover, and urban uses; and that water scarcity remains a major threat to development and human health in developing countries.18

In short, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the conferences on state policies and on observable environmental impacts. It would be unreasonable to expect such conferences to yield lasting and clear effects on states and on the environment. It is equally unreasonable to assign blame to conferences for failing to reverse environmental decline.

A full list of global environmental conferences is presented in Table 1.

*Functions of Conference Diplomacy*

Global environmental conferences also have a number of indirect effects with longer-term effects on national policies that affect international governance and the prospects for sustainable development. Without a strong theory of state interests, it is not possible to draw clear causal inferences about the influence of international conferences on state interests and practices. Theorists across paradigmatic divides, with the exception of staunch rational choice theorists, should be able to agree that conferences that are able to mobilize more of the functions I discuss later in this article will have a stronger impact on member states than will conferences unable to mobilize as many. Some variables are of interest to neoliberal institutionalists because they influence state assessments of the economic cost of environmental pollution, the ecological benefits of its solution, and the political coalitions associated with each functional issue on the agenda. Conferences thus influence international linkage politics. For constructivists, important variables are the
Table 1  Global Environmental and Sustainable Conferences Since 1972

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name, location</th>
<th>Product/outcome</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>World Population Conference, Bucharest</td>
<td>World Population Plan of Action</td>
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<td>1975</td>
<td>World Conference on Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>UN Conference on Desertification, Nairobi</td>
<td>Plan of Action to Combat Desertification</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>UN Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver</td>
<td>UN Centre for Human Settlements, Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development, Vienna</td>
<td>Vienna Programme of Action on Science and Technology for Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>World Climate Conference, Geneva</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>UN Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy, Nairobi</td>
<td>Nairobi Programme of Action for the Development and Utilization of New and Renewable Sources of Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, Rome</td>
<td>Programme of Action on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Second World Population Conference, Mexico City</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>World Conference on Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Second World Climate Conference, Geneva</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)</td>
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Table 1 continued

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name, location</th>
<th>Product/outcome</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo</td>
<td>Programme of Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Habitat II, Istanbul</td>
<td>The Habitat Agenda and Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>World Food Summit, Rome</td>
<td>Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>UNGA Special Session on Sustainable Development</td>
<td></td>
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information channels and actual pieces of information that shape states' appreciation of how their citizens are affected by environmental degradation and the political coalitions that support environmental protection. The causal mechanisms by which institutional factors influence state choice are highly contingent upon national administrative characteristics and domestic state/society relations. Moving beyond a systemic level of analysis, variation in an individual state's sensitivity to these functions of conference diplomacy would probably vary by at least the following national level factors: freedom of the press, literacy, access to the media, and democratic institutions that enable citizens to express concern to governments (state/society relations).19

While it is not possible to directly stop human activities that degrade the environment through universal declarations or at conferences, global UN conferences can enhance governments’ concern about the environment and strengthen their willingness to commit scarce political and financial resources to its protection.

Agenda setting. Global environmental conferences can place new issues on the global agenda and galvanize national concern by publicizing these issues. The conferences often have the effect of reframing issues for decisionmakers, locating the issue within a new political matrix, and thus making possible new tactical and substantive linkages by which
policies may be developed. For instance, environmental protection was firmly placed on the international agenda at the UNCHE conference, and the preliminary Founex meeting effectively reconciled North-South differences about the priority accorded to environmental considerations in economic planning. The meeting established the principle that the two goals could be compatible, especially with concessionary finance from the North to pay for incremental pollution control costs in the developing countries. UNCHE also helped inform Northern governments of Southern countries’ concern about resource deterioration, deforestation and water quality, and the underlying problems of insufficient money for sewage treatment and effective resource management. The North gradually came to appreciate the possibility of an alternate agenda that would include the South’s concerns and still supplement the North’s primary focus on industrial pollution, waste management, and transboundary environmental threats.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development shifted public debate and discourse on population issues to a focus on the underlying social, political, and economic forces that influence population growth. The Programme of Action marked a distinctive shift in population policy toward promoting cooperation to eradicate poverty, encouraging universal access to health care services, and empowering women.

*Popularizing issues and raising consciousness.* Conferences provide a brief window of opportunity for educating the mass public and government officials about environmental issues. Conferences spawn publicity about the declarations and statements of principles the meetings produce. Because many journalists attend the conferences, they provide an opportunity for NGOs and the media to publicize issues and to educate members of the media about environmental issues. For instance, at UNCED the Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC) sent one person whose responsibility was to court the media and frame the presentation of the daily reporting in a way that would be critical of the United States. NRDC hoped to provoke the United States into taking a more environmentally sympathetic role at the conference.

*Generating new information and identifying new challenges for governments.* Preparation for conferences often generates information for countries about their environmental problems, the array of policies available for addressing such issues, and the political coalitions organized around them. States are invited to submit in advance of the conference national reports about conditions in their countries. This process
can lead states to learn of new problems, clarify recognition of their national interest, and identify the political landscape potential for compromise. These reports are often synthesized by the secretariats for subsequent dissemination.22

Providing general alerts and early warning of new threats. Conferences help focus attention on new problems and also help identify institutional gaps and needs in addressing such problems. The “Assessment of the World Food Situation,” presented to the 1984 World Food Conference, helped focus attention on the “world food gap” that threatened developing countries. UNCHE helped identify the urgency of addressing land-based marine pollution and the institutional need to create a global environmental monitoring system, which subsequently became one of UNEP’s core activities.23

Galvanizing administrative reform. Conferences also prompt governments to create or reform national bodies responsible for forms of environmental protection. National administrative bodies serve as the nodes of transnational environmental policy networks. At the time of UNCHE, only 26 governments had administrative agencies responsible for environmental protection (15 in developed, 11 in developing countries). The preparation for UNCHE led many governments to recognize the need for creating national environmental agencies. By 1982, the total number was up to 144 (34 in developed, 110 in developing countries). UNCED led to the establishment of Sustainable Development (SD) committees and bodies in nearly 150 countries.24

Adopting new norms, certifying new doctrinal consensus, and setting global standards. Global conferences are sites of doctrinal contestation. UNCHE developed new principles of soft law that have been interpreted and applied by international lawyers to inform a generation of international environmental lawyers.25 Specific programmatic action, such as the 2,509 specific proposals in Agenda 21, set the stage for legitimate responses to international conferences. The identification of the number of people at risk from malnutrition and targets for official development assistance (ODA) and hunger reduction stipulated at World Food Conferences similarly established standards and aspirations for subsequent governmental practices.

Promoting mass involvement of new actors. International environmental conferences contribute to the participation of new actors in international environmental politics by inviting new groups of actors to attend
international conferences. Environmental conferences have been leaders in the introduction of NGOs to international diplomacy. These meetings developed the practice, introduced at UNCHE, of holding parallel NGO conferences and governmental conferences and admitting NGO participants as observers at the governmental conferences. Roughly 178 NGOs participated at UNCHE.26 Over 1,400 were represented at UNCED.

Despite the vast increase in the number of NGOs attending international environmental conferences, the participation is still heavily tilted toward the North, where NGOs have greater financial support and are better able to find resources to attend conferences. At UNCED, 70 percent of the registered NGOs came from industrialized countries.

Conferences provide the potential for networking and developing transnational issue networks to coordinate international campaigns, and NGOs may subsequently provide information to governments and apply pressure on governments.

Conferences often invite participation from major nonstate groups, including NGOs, the transnational scientific community, and, since UNCED, multinational corporations.27 Such groups are invited to attend expert group meetings in advance of the conference, participate in parallel NGO events, and even attend governmental meetings as observers. Participation is often, particularly in preliminary meetings, by expert advisory groups of specialists such as the Joint Group of Experts on Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP), the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), and umbrella industry NGOs, such as the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). Mass public NGOs tend not to participate in the early stages.

Global environmental conferences may be deliberately designed to foster new coalitions more generally and to build support for environmental protection at the national level by including the political influence of transnational policy networks. Maurice Strong, secretary-general of UNCHE and UNCED, coined the phrase "the process is the policy" to capture the idea that through conference diplomacy more actors and perspectives could be introduced to international environmental policymaking.

There is still a wide variation in the extent of NGO influence at conferences. The rules of participation remain set by states’ decisions in ECOSOC, and the organizations are continually constrained (if not totally hamstrung) by state choices to allocate resources and set rules of behavior for the organizational dealings with NGOs. NGOs are often more influential at national and community levels, but participation and recognition at international conferences reinforces or establishes their domestic claims to authority. Yet even while states cling to formal sovereignty, the exercise of practical sovereignty erodes with NGO
participation.²⁸ Still, Realists would be quick to point out that the willingness to extend participation to NGOs is given by states and is always subject to being reversed.

**Prospects for Rio+10 and Sustainable Development**

The aggregation of UN conferences and constructivist forces has been to create a diffuse array of pressures on states militating for forms of sustainable development. Rio+10 provides the next major opportunity for reforming and streamlining multilateral environmental governance. It is intended to refocus international attention on sustainable development and to assess accomplishments since 1992.

Yet, as with the writing of this piece, it lacks most of the properties of conferences that led to productive outputs that contributed to improved international environmental governance. Rio+5 was widely regarded as a failure in this regard, as it did not mobilize any long-standing interest. Mass public interest in sustainable development remains weak, and the United States appears to be developing a new global diplomatic posture of skeptical multilateralism, at best, as seen by the abandonment of the Kyoto Protocol and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Consequently, there is little political impulse for a productive conference. Multilateral financial and technological transfers for sustainable development have dwindled since the early 1990s. Moreover, there is growing disenchantment with UNEP's remote location in Kenya and its lack of resources. The Commission for Sustainable Development lacks the administrative autonomy or financial resources to be able to reach out to civil society to develop any of the conference functions discussed above that could potentially influence state policies and environmental quality. States also appear increasingly concerned about controlling NGO participation at the meetings.

The best prospects for products from the Rio+10 are probably institutional reforms. The international environmental governance system has not been significantly overhauled in three decades. After UNCHE, UNEP was the only international institution responsible for environmental protection. Since then, however, most international institutions have assumed some environmental responsibilities. Recent evaluations suggest that there are administrative overlaps in the system and inefficiencies, as institutions have assumed new responsibilities for the environment.²⁹ Suggestions for improvements focus on reforming UNEP and on creating a Global Environmental Organization (GEO).

A GEO should be established to fulfill the policy and technology-based functions that provide institutional support for multilateral
environmental governance. A GEO would consolidate environmental policy research, technology databases, and clearinghouses; conduct training; and centralize the secretariats that administer current environmental regimes. Centralizing these secretariats would facilitate the creation of a broader global policy network across specific environmental issues and justify the creation of national environmental embassies to represent states and participate in future negotiations. A GEO could also serve as a legal advocate for environmental protection and regulations to counterbalance the World Trade Organization (WTO) by collecting a roster of international environmental lawyers to participate in WTO panels. The GEO should have high-profile annual ministerial meetings to address all environmental issues to ensure widespread involvement in environmental policy networks and galvanize rapid responses to new alerts. Ongoing efforts would continue to be addressed through the existing secretariats and conferences of parties. The GEO could even have a panel of environmental inspectors available to verify compliance by states and firms with multilateral environmental agreements. UNEP would be retained as the monitoring and research hub of the UN system, as it was initially intended by its architects at UNCHE. The UN Commission on Sustainable Development, as well as some other institutional bodies within the UN and Bretton Woods systems, could be absorbed into the GEO.

**Conclusion**

UN environmental conferences have helped contribute to a broader shift in international environmental governance through educating governmental elites, exposing them to new agendas and discourses, and providing them with added resources to pursue sustainable development. While Rio+10 lacks many of the conditions that have accompanied successful conferences, Rio+10 may at the least encourage multilevel participation, improve contact between civil society and states, and streamline institutional responsibilities within the UN and Bretton Woods systems for sustainable development.

While the political preconditions appear modest for any dramatic achievements and cognitive transformations at Rio+10, we must remember that the conference is part of a thirty-year-long era of multilateral environmental protection. The conference can continue to legitimate the participation of NGOs and scientists in international environmental governance, improve contact between civil society and states, and streamline institutional responsibilities within the UN and Bretton Woods systems for sustainable development. Even in the absence of strong political
support by member governments for significant multilateral commitments, progressive governments and other conference participants can still press for reforms to existing arrangements that will ensure more national reporting on their movement toward sustainable development, create information clearinghouses about green technologies, and endow UNEP, a new GEO, or another international institution with verification authority to monitor international movement toward sustainable development. 

Notes

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