

# Coloring the UN Environmental

## *The Catalytic Role of the UN Environment Programme*

*Maria Ivanova*

John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA, USA  
*maria.ivanova@umb.edu*

### 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Global challenges—from the climate crisis to health epidemics—have intensified in recent years and global responses have become ever more urgent and important. The United Nations, the most prominent international institution created to maintain peace and security, safeguard human rights, and ensure human development, has come under pressure as Member States have decreased contributions and blocked reform. Yet in the three-quarters of a century since its creation, the UN has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize eleven times for work on peace, refugees, social justice, chemical weapons prohibition, and measures to deal with climate change.<sup>2</sup> The UN also bestows awards for achievement by others and, in September 2019, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) presented its highest honor—the Champions of the Earth award—to Fridays For Future, an activist youth organization. Speaking on behalf of the organization at the award ceremony in New York, fifteen-year-old Kallan Benson declined the prize and challenged the UN to earn the award itself. “We offer to hold it for you to earn,” she stated. “You at the United Nations hold the power to save humanity from itself. You must act in time to become the real champions of the Earth.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2020 as we mark the 75th anniversary of the creation of the UN, and as scholars and analysts ask, “Are we witnessing the end of multilateralism?”<sup>4</sup> we

---

1 This article draws on the research done for the author’s forthcoming book with MIT Press *A Revisionist History of the World’s Premier Environmental Institution: UNEP at Fifty*.

2 One agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees received the prize twice, in 1954 and 1981.

3 Benson 2019.

4 World Politics Review 2020.

need to reflect on the past, present, and potential of the UN to address contemporary complex global challenges. The profound transformation of the planet has led to significant advances in human welfare, but has put such a strain on ecosystems and natural functions and processes that the ability of the planet to sustain life as we know it can no longer be taken for granted. Without an effective global institution to initiate and implement effective collective action, we will continue pushing at the planetary boundaries and risk a global systemic crisis.<sup>5</sup> What would the UN need to do to be the effective institution so critical today? How can it become the champion of the earth that youth challenged it to be? This essay presents an empirically grounded history of environmental governance in the UN and its anchor institution, UNEP, which was expected to divert the UN agencies in environmental ways and color their programs environmental. It provides an assessment of existing gaps with the goal of providing a foundation to enable informed decisions about the future.

## 2 The First Environmental Summit: The UN Conference on the Human Environment

Environmental problems were not among the core concerns for the UN—peace and security, human rights, and economic and social affairs—at its creation in 1945. The environmental alarm clock buzzed in many ears, in many nations, in the 1960s and 1970s as the threats posed by toxic chemicals, large-scale destruction of natural ecosystems, and the loss of species became visible and were clearly caused by human activity. A crescendo of public concern led to the first Earth Day on 22 April 1970 when 20 million Americans spilled into the streets in protest and demanded governmental action to address pollution. The result was the creation of the environmental policy institutions in the United States—the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Recognizing that environmental challenges did not stop at national borders and that their solutions required joint effort, many governments were ready for more informed and systematic collective action.<sup>6</sup>

In 1972, 113 countries (out of 132 UN Member States at the time, or more than 85 percent) gathered at the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, to collectively tackle environmental challenges and create the international architecture for addressing global environmental problems.

---

<sup>5</sup> Steffen et al. 2015; Future Earth 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ivanova 2020.

This starting point of global environmental governance, the Stockholm Conference, was not a predetermined outcome; it was the result of individual initiative and leadership that translated into leadership by Member States and by the UN Secretariat. Swedish diplomat Inga Thorsson convinced the Swedish mission to the UN to derail the plan to hold a UN conference on nuclear energy and propose an environmental conference instead.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, much of the success of the Stockholm Conference was due to the energy, commitment, and diplomatic skills of Maurice Strong, its secretary-general. As Sweden's UN ambassador Sverker Åström recalled in his memoir, Strong's appointment was a real strike of luck. "Strong was—and is," Åström wrote in 2003, "perhaps the best example of a 'pragmatic idealist.' His talent, experience, engagement, personal charm and ability to generate trust made him the ideal organizer of the large and incredibly complicated undertaking of a world conference."<sup>8</sup> The leadership by individuals would eventually result in the creation of a suite of new international institutions, and global environmental governance would develop along a time line punctuated by world summits held at anniversary moments every ten to twenty years. (Figure 1 presents a time line of global environmental governance highlighting key world events and new institutions; Table 1 lists the global environmental summits since 1972.)

One of Strong's most important achievements was the commitment to active participation that he elicited from developing countries. He recognized early on that in the period of postcolonialism, developing countries might be opposed to what could be perceived as a Northern antipollution agenda. To allay fears of green imperialism, Strong traveled to every continent and guaranteed African and Asian leaders that their interests would be respected. To address the core perceived tension between environment and development, he convened a panel of scientists and development experts from developing countries in Founex, Switzerland, in June 1971. The meeting produced a seminal report that explained that environmental protection should not be viewed as a barrier to development but as an enabling condition.<sup>9</sup> As a result of Strong's leadership, developing countries' governments decided not to boycott the conference.

They were also motivated to actively engage in the deliberations to attain legitimacy nationally and internationally. Many of the newly independent states in Africa and Latin America were governed by military dictatorships, which were using development as a tool for what Peter Calvert and Susan

7 Ivanova 2007.

8 Åström 2003, 85.

9 Holdgate, Kassas, and White 1982.

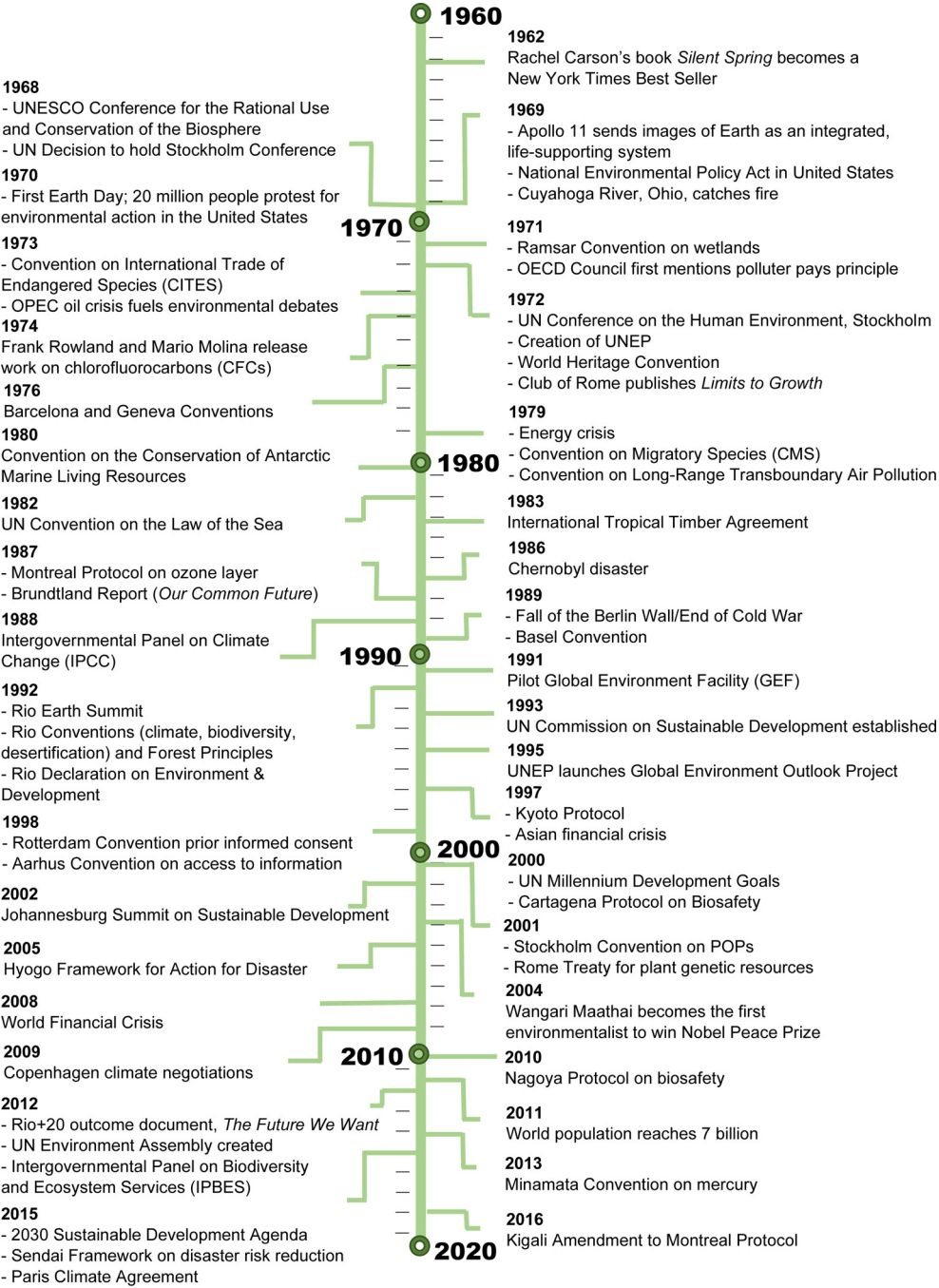


FIGURE 1 Time line of global environmental governance

TABLE 1 Fifty years of environmental summits

Logo/Year	Conference name	Location	No. of states	Outputs
 1972	UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), also known as the <i>Stockholm Conference</i>	Stockholm, Sweden	113	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Creation of UN Environment Programme (UNEP)</li> <li>– Declaration of the UN Conference on the Human Environment, or Stockholm Declaration with 26 principles</li> <li>– Action Plan for the Human Environment with 109 recommendations</li> </ul>
 1992	UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the <i>Rio Earth Summit</i>	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	172	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Creation of the Commission on Sustainable Development</li> <li>– Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, or Rio Declaration with 27 principles</li> <li>– Agenda 21</li> </ul>
 2002	World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), also known as the <i>Johannesburg Summit</i>	Johannesburg, South Africa	191	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development</li> <li>– Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development</li> </ul>
 2012	UN Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as <i>Rio+20</i>	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	188	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– High-Level Political Forum established to replace Commission on Sustainable Development</li> <li>– The Future We Want outcome document</li> <li>– 2030 Agenda</li> <li>– Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) process launched</li> </ul>
2022 Summit	Planned commemoration of the creation of UNEP as per UN General Assembly Resolution 73/333			

Calvert call “internal colonization.”<sup>10</sup> For example, Brazil in 1972 was a military dictatorship and its delegation to the Stockholm Conference was openly hostile to the environmental agenda. Representing the repressive military government of General Emilio Medici who had seized power by coup in 1969, the Brazilian delegation defended the official policy of “economic growth, with the gains loudly proclaimed and the costs swept under the rug of censorship.”<sup>11</sup> Years later, Brazil recanted from its unreasonable positions and offered to host the Stockholm+20 conference, which will remain in history as the landmark Rio Earth Summit, and then the Rio+20 conference in 2012.

Despite mistrust and suspicion between developing and developed countries, and the absence of the Soviet bloc countries that did not participate in solidarity with East Germany, which was not allowed to engage because it was not an official member of the UN or any of its specialized agencies, the Stockholm Conference attained an unprecedented level of agreement on the problems at hand and possible paths forward. As Peter Stone, adviser to Strong on public information issues, observed in 1972: “Many governments began their participation in Stockholm with considerable reluctance founded on the suspicion that it was all a nine days’ wonder, or a transient concern of the rich. But in the end even the most reluctant took the Conference seriously.”<sup>12</sup> Governments, UN specialized agencies, UN programs and departments, and numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in the 1972 Stockholm Conference elevating environmental issues from a local and national concern to the international and global level.

The conference produced the flagship Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment with 26 principles, which provided the foundation for future international environmental law, an Action Plan with 109 recommendations, and a draft document that a few months later would be finalized as UN General Assembly Resolution 2997, *Institutional and Financial Arrangements for International Environmental Cooperation*. Principle 21 affirmed nation-states’ “sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.” The Stockholm Con-

10 As they explain, millions lost the land they owned or inhabited to “make way for dams, industrial plants, mines, military security zones, waste dumps, plantations, tourist resorts, motorways, urban redevelopment and other schemes designed to transform the South into an appendage of the North.” Calvert and Calvert 1999, 195.

11 Schneider 1991, 265.

12 Stone 1973, 16.

ference thus built the foundation for new international legal agreements to address environmental problems and created the “anchor institution” for the global environment, the UN Environment Programme, which would champion such agreements in the years ahead.

### 3 The Anchor Institution: The UN Environment Programme

While governments had expressed explicit preference to deal with environmental issues through existing international institutions, in the course of the preparations for the Stockholm Conference, it became clear that no progress would be made without sound institutional arrangements. The United States was the strongest proponent (along with Sweden) of effective international institutional arrangements and it argued for the establishment of a “strong executive for environmental affairs with broad terms of reference.”<sup>13</sup> John W. McDonald, then director of economic and social affairs at the Bureau of International Organization Affairs at the US State Department, developed the idea for a strong and independent environmental institution. He had previously championed the creation of the UN Population Fund and drafted the text for what would become Resolution 2997 establishing UNEP. An advisory committee to the US secretary of state proposed the creation of a UN executive for environmental affairs with broad terms of reference and the tasks of catalyzing environmental action, developing policies and guidelines, establishing a global monitoring system, and providing dispute settlement. The United States advocated for an intergovernmental body to advise and support the executive, in contrast to a scenario where the executive would merely implement the body’s guidance and decisions.

Importantly, the United States recognized the responsibility it had to the rest of the world and took on much of the financing obligations for the new environmental institution. “As the world’s most industrialized nation, we are the greatest polluter. Thus, we cannot reasonably expect others to bear a disproportionate share of the costs in cleaning up the wastes that we generate,” Christian A. Herter Jr., special assistant to the secretary of state for environmental affairs, told Congress in 1973 on his return from the Stockholm Conference. He explained the relative global pollution burden of the United States noting that, with less than 6 percent of the world’s population, the United States pro-

---

13 US Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment 1972, 13.

duced more than one-third of global energy, which relied exclusively on fossil fuels. He described the significant use of resources and also pointed out that the Council of Environmental Quality had reported that the United States had “dumped 48 million tons of wastes at sea in 1968 ... In conclusion, Mr. Chairman,” Christian Herter remarked, “I believe it has become manifestly clear that many environmental problems are global in character and only can be effectively dealt with internationally.”<sup>14</sup> UNEP was the international institution to facilitate global collective action on the environment, and the United States was to contribute 40 percent of the Environment Fund that would provide the core resources for UNEP.

The institutional landscape for environmental governance, however, was not empty. A number of UN specialized agencies, funds, and programs already had activities related to conservation of natural resources and pollution. The number of treaties and organizations responsible for their administration was increasing, and governments saw coordination of overlapping efforts as an issue of paramount importance. The most significant opposition to the creation of an environmental body, therefore, came not from governments, and especially not from the United States, but from existing international institutions that feared the competition from a new UN body.

Ultimately, UNEP was designed to assess the state of the planet, inform and enable countries to react, and promote partnership within the UN system to tackle issues that no one state or organization could deal with on its own. In essence, UNEP was to be “a pinch of silver to energize mighty reactions” and “color their programs environmental,” Gordon Harrison of the Ford Foundation remarked in 1977.<sup>15</sup> Resolution 2997 clearly outlined UNEP’s coordination function to “provide general policy guidance for the direction and co-ordination of environmental programmes within the United Nations system,” and established the Environment Coordination Board comprising the executive heads of the UN agencies under the chairmanship of the UNEP executive director to ensure “co-operation and co-ordination among all bodies concerned in the implementation of environmental programmes.”<sup>16</sup> While UNEP was created to be the new leading global environmental authority and advocate, it had to find its place among the larger existing UN agencies in terms of staff, resources, and infrastructure, and gain authority among them. The agencies dubbed UNEP the “United Nations Everything Programme,” viewed it with suspicion, and

14 US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements 1973, 6–7.

15 Harrison 1977, 2.

16 UN General Assembly, Resolution 2997 (1972).



carefully guarded their turf.<sup>17</sup> The fear of losing certain parts of one's work program, budget, and staff if duplications were eliminated led agencies to jealously defend their "sovereignty" and resist efforts at coordination.

Created as a nimble, fast, and flexible entity at the core of the UN system, UNEP was to be the world's ecological conscience and catalyze environmental action. It was quite successful in performing that part of its mandate and coloring the UN environmental, inspiring awareness about environmental issues and leading to a burgeoning of activities to address them across all existing agencies. The explosion in the number of international organizations has overwhelmed the series of UNEP-driven coordination bodies and mechanisms, which have yielded few results. As often pointed out by UN officials, "Everyone wants to coordinate but no one wants to be coordinated." Second, other UN bodies have refused to accept UNEP's mandate to coordinate all environmental activities in the UN system due to "institutional seniority." A number of UN bodies, including the International Labour Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Health Organization, World Meteorological Organization, Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization, International Atomic Energy Agency, International Civil Aviation Organization, and UN Development Programme (UNDP), all possessed environmental responsibilities long before UNEP was created. (See Table 2.) These activities increased significantly over time but the institutions rarely deferred to UNEP for guidance and much less coordination. Indeed, coordination has been UNEP's most significant challenge over the years, or as Mark Imber put it, "UNEP could no more be expected to 'coordinate' the system-wide activities of the UN than could a medieval monarch 'coordinate' his feudal barons."<sup>18</sup> UNEP's geographical remoteness from the agencies it was supposed to coordinate, and the absence of functioning communication technologies to connect Nairobi to the cities hosting the UN agencies, resulted in limited interaction and significant suspicion.

Envisioned as normative and catalytic and with no operational functions to avoid unnecessary competition with existing organizations, UNEP was expected to maintain an overview of the activities of national governments, international organizations, and nongovernmental bodies identifying needed environmental programs and catalyzing action toward their realization. It would also serve as the center of information on global environmental trends

---

<sup>17</sup> Harrison 1977, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Imber 1993, 83.

TABLE 2     Select international organizations

Organization	Year founded	Headquarters
International Labour Organization (ILO)	1919	Geneva
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	1945	Rome
UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)	1945	Paris
International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)	1947	Montreal
Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO)	1948	London
World Health Organization (WHO)	1948	Geneva
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)	1950	Geneva
International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	1957	Vienna
UN Development Programme (UNDP)	1965	New York
UN Environment Programme (UNEP)	1972	Nairobi

and administer the Environment Fund with the purpose to stimulate and support environmental activities within existing intergovernmental bodies and steer them on the path of sustainability.

In the past fifty years, UNEP has identified new problems and sounded the clarion call for their resolution. It has also identified policy, legal, and practical solutions and has been eager to apply them. Some of its constituency have called on UNEP to address their problems, but others have pulled it back arguing that its job is not to be on the ground but to keep the big picture in front of everyone. UNEP has had to constantly navigate the tension between environment and development, and between the demands of the Global North and the needs of the Global South. It therefore has been conflicted between assuming the role of a normative leader and operational support manager.

4     The Global Environmental Conventions

One of the most notable achievements of UNEP has been the creation of a progressively larger number of environmental instruments and institutions at the national and international level to guide decisions and influence behavior. The organization has responded to scientific discoveries of new problems, such as the work by Sherwood Rowland and Mario Molina on the effects of chlorofluorocarbons, a group of synthetic chemicals used widely in aerosols, coolants, and refrigerators, in destroying the stratospheric ozone layer. UNEP has launched

new scientific bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) jointly with the World Meteorological Organization to bring the science on climate change into the international policy process. It also provides the secretariat for the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), an independent body created by states to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Development of international environmental law has been one of UNEP's, and indeed the UN's, landmark successes.<sup>19</sup> Global environmental conventions, also known as treaties or agreements, are the main international legal instruments for promoting collective action toward solving global environmental problems and staying within what scientists have come to call planetary boundaries.<sup>20</sup> They guide national behavior, establish policy frameworks, and suggest courses of action to address multiple environmental challenges, including the safeguarding of species, ecosystems, and human health. UNEP has observed and measured environmental problems such as ozone layer depletion, biodiversity loss, persistent organic pollutants, and climate change. It has identified their causes and consequences, raised awareness of the planetary dimension of the environmental challenge, and developed plans of action that demanded the engagement of most, if not all, countries. The global treaties on ozone layer protection, regulation of chemicals and hazardous waste, climate change, desertification, and biodiversity were all created and concluded with UNEP's engagement.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, during the first decade of UNEP's operations, almost as many international agreements were created as during the previous sixty years.<sup>22</sup> Since 1973, Peter Haas wrote, UNEP has catalyzed the development of more than 40 percent of "multilateral environmental treaties adopted outside the European Community."<sup>23</sup> Although many scholars point to the existence of hundreds of multilateral environmental agreements,<sup>24</sup> there are twelve to fifteen global environmental agreements, those concerned with global rather than regional issues and with global universal membership, and UNEP has been the main actor behind their creation. (Table 3 presents thirteen global environmental conventions.) However, environmental degradation continues and it is critical to assess the level of implementation of these agreements, eval-

---

19 Ivanova 2010.

20 Steffen et al. 2015.

21 Steiner, Kimball, and Scanlon 2003, 236.

22 McCormick 1989, 174.

23 Haas 1994, 44.

24 Mitchell et al. 2020.

TABLE 3 Global environmental conventions

Adopted/ entry into force		Convention	No. of parties	Issue area	Location
1971/1975		Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention)	170	Biodiversity	Gland
1972/1975		UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Convention (WHC)	193	Biodiversity	Paris
1973/1975		Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)	183	Biodiversity	Geneva
1979/1983		Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS)	130	Biodiversity	Bonn
1985/1988 1987/1989		Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer (Vienna Convention) and Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone (Montreal Protocol)	198	Atmosphere	Nairobi
1989/1992		Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal (Basel Convention)	187	Chemicals and Waste	Geneva
1992/1994		United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)	197	Atmosphere	Bonn
1992/1993		Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)	196	Biodiversity	Montreal
1994/1996		UN Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa (UNCCD)	197	Land	Bonn
1997/2005		International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC)	184	Biodiversity	Rome

TABLE 3 Global environmental conventions (*cont.*)

Adopted/ entry into force		Convention	No. of parties	Issue area	Location
1998/2004		Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade (Rotterdam Convention)	161	Chemicals and Waste	Geneva
2001/2004		Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (Stockholm Convention)	184	Chemicals and Waste	Geneva
2013/2017		Minamata Convention on Mercury	117	Chemicals and Waste	Geneva

uate the reasons for success and the challenges, and devise instruments and strategies to effectively implement international obligations at the national level.

Much like with the various UN agencies working on environmental matters, the multiplicity of new instruments has increased demands on Member States and has led to competition for attention and resources. And perhaps most importantly, implementation of the complex and growing body of international environmental law has been and remains a significant challenge. UNEP's "biggest success has also been the biggest failure," Gus Speth, founder of major international environmental NGOs and former administrator of UNDP, pointed out. UNEP developed most of the multilateral environmental agreements currently in existence, which had defined the system of global environmental governance. "Very few of these agreements are actually succeeding in their intended purposes and that to me is the failure," Speth noted. "The UNFCCC's [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change] failure in particular is very serious and, from 1989 forward, this failure is mainly attributable to the United States."<sup>25</sup> The history of global environmental governance, therefore, illustrates the change in UN Member State behavior and support showing that nation-states are multilevel actors with preferences evolving over time. The dramatic change in support and opposition to environmental activities

25 James Gustave Speth, interviewed by the author, Boston, 18 February 2019. See also Speth 2005.

and institutions in the UN from the United States and Brazil illuminate the importance of political power and leadership (and lack thereof).

Establishment of numerous new international agreements is not necessarily reflective of impact on the environment. Implementing the obligations under the conventions reflects the extent to which countries are committed to environmental protection and shows good governance. Yet the level of implementation has not been empirically measured and is mostly unknown. Currently, there is no global standard for measuring whether countries are fulfilling their international obligations under the various environmental conventions, what efforts they are taking to implement them, or gaps in national capacity that need to be addressed. Furthermore, there are no systematic review mechanisms to compare progress in the definition of national policies—across countries and conventions—and to understand the strengths and weaknesses of existing governance mechanisms. As a result, countries have little systematic, comparative information about their performance on their obligations to global environmental conventions. There is no baseline against which to assess performance, actions, or even expectations and, without empirical evidence, we risk erroneous conclusions and inappropriate regulatory interventions based on assumptions rather than evidence. Importantly, in the absence of measurements of implementation, it is impossible to determine whether the conventions help solve the problems they were intended to address. And without serious and systematic support for implementation, international environmental agreements have remained aspirations rather than plans of actions incorporated into domestic legal practices.

In this context, there is a clear need for improved reporting, relevant analysis, and capacity building to facilitate implementation. With accurate, systematic, time series, and comparable information, policymakers would be able to articulate clear goals and strategies, and mobilize the necessary resources. Parties face no penalties for not meeting their commitments and breaches cannot be sanctioned. Compliance and implementation have, therefore, to be enticed rather than coerced. If relevant and reliable data were available, countries would likely be inclined to improve performance even in the absence of an overarching judicial system or a coercive penalty system to ensure enforcement of these agreements. If serious support to countries lacking the capacity to implement treaty provisions were to be provided based on such information, progress would accelerate and lead to a race to the top rather than the current stagnation.

The Center for Governance and Sustainability at the University of Massachusetts Boston has created the Environmental Conventions Index, an empirical tool that measures the implementation of global environmental

conventions and enables self-assessment and comparison with peers.<sup>26</sup> The index evaluates the implementation of global environmental conventions by assessing the actions signatory countries have taken to fulfill their commitments. It includes six conventions in two thematic clusters—biodiversity and chemicals and waste—and could be expanded to include other conventions. The index is grounded in the national reports submitted by state parties to each convention and is presented as a composite score from 0 to 5 covering data from 2001 to 2019. It illustrates trends across countries, within countries (across issues and over time), and across conventions. It creates a baseline against which to assess performance and empowers subsequent analyses of factors that enable or prevent countries from implementing their obligations. This is especially important to developing countries as they seek to improve their capacity to solve environmental problems more efficiently and effectively.

## 5 Conclusion

Since at least the 1992 Earth Summit, environment and development have been addressed in tandem at international negotiations and by multilateral environmental agreements through the concept of sustainable development. There has, therefore, been a conceptual convergence that has brought environmental concerns into the core of UN operations. The inclusion of provisions on financing, technology transfer, and capacity building into environmental agreements has provided necessary incentives for a larger number of countries to be a part of a multilateral solution to solve environmental crises globally. This conceptual integration, however, has not taken place at the institutional level. The UN system has a wide array of organizations that touch on environmental and development issues, directly or indirectly. The lack of a governing framework that allows for integration of these two topics in a coherent, coordinated matter raises the question of how effective the individual organizations can really be.

Paragraph 87 of the Rio+20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*, reaffirms “the need to strengthen international environmental governance *within the context of the institutional framework for sustainable development*” (empha-

---

26 See [www.environmentalconventionsindex.org](http://www.environmentalconventionsindex.org) The Environmental Conventions Index was created with financial support from the Federal Office for the Environment of Switzerland, an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship of the Carnegie Corporation, the UN Environment Programme, and the University of Massachusetts Boston.

sis added). The next paragraph asserts that Member States “are committed to strengthening the role of the United Nations Environment Programme as the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, promotes the *coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development* within the United Nations system and serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment” (emphasis added). The intention of Member States to separate environmental and sustainable development issues is clear. According to the outcome document, UNEP’s role is simply to address one dimension of sustainable development—the environmental agenda—even if it is intrinsically related to sustainable development in general. This creates significant conceptual and institutional confusion. Indeed, the outcome document does not provide a clear division of labor between the environment and sustainable development institutions. Thus, the potential for overlap, duplication, and competition among UN institutions and multilateral environmental agreements remains significant.<sup>27</sup>

Yet complexity can turn into opportunity. In 2015, governments committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, a set of global goals that integrate people, planet, peace, and prosperity. A significant number of the seventeen goals relate directly to the environment. UNEP’s responsibility is to ensure that the environmental dimension is integrated in whatever sustainable development efforts and policies emerge in the UN system. In this scenario, the idea of global governance in the United Nations makes sense only if governance for the environment and governance for sustainable development are seen and work as one. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the need for better communication and integration between the two frameworks, which are still conceptually and institutionally segregated. As we prepare to commemorate the 50th anniversary of UNEP and soon thereafter the 80th anniversary of the UN, it will be critical to harness the interplay of global institutions to ensure that environment is integrated across their policies and operations; indeed, that the UN is “colored environmental.”

## Bibliography

Åström, Sverker. *Ögonblick: Från Ett Halvsekel I Ud-Tjänst* [*Moment: From Half a Century of Foreign Affairs Duty*] (Stockholm: Lind, 2003).

Benson, Kallan. “Kallan Benson’s Speech for Fridays For Future at UN Champions

---

<sup>27</sup> Ivanova 2013.



- of the Earth Award Assembly." New York, 27 September 2019. <https://youtu.be/sqiFsoJARHI>.
- Calvert, Peter, and Susan Calvert. *The South, the North and the Environment* (New York: Pinter, 1999).
- Environmental Studies Board. *Institutional Arrangements for International Environmental Cooperation: A Report to the Department of State by the Committee for International Environmental Programs* (Washington, DC: National Academies of Sciences, 1972).
- Future Earth. "Our Future on Earth 2020." 2020. <https://futureearth.org/publications/our-future-on-earth/>.
- Haas, Peter M. "Institutions: United Nations Environment Programme." *Environment* 36 (7) (1994), 43–45.
- Harrison, Gordon. "Is There a United Nations Environment Programme? Special Investigation at the Request of the Ford Foundation." In the author's possession, 1977.
- Holdgate, Martin W., Mohammed Kassas, and Gilbert F. White. "The World Environment 1972–1982" (Nairobi: UN Environment Programme, 1982).
- Imber, Mark. "Too Many Cooks? The Post-Rio Reform of the United Nations." *International Affairs* 69 (1) (1993), 55–70.
- Ivanova, Maria. "Designing the United Nations Environment Programme: A Story of Compromise and Confrontation." *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 7 (3) (2007), 337–361.
- Ivanova, Maria. "UNEP in Global Environmental Governance: Design, Leadership, Location." *Global Environmental Politics* 10 (1) (2010), 30–59.
- Ivanova, Maria. "The Contested Legacy of Rio+20." *Global Environmental Politics* 13 (4) (2013), 1–11.
- Ivanova, Maria. "As Earth Day turns 50, the US has abdicated its leadership role in protecting the environment." *The Boston Globe* April 21, 2020.
- McCormick, John. *Reclaiming Paradise: The Global Environmental Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- Mitchell, Ronald B., Liliana B. Andonova, Mark Axelrod, and Jörg Balsiger. "What We Know (and Could Know) about International Environmental Agreements." *Global Environmental Politics* 20 (1) (2020), 103–121. DOI 10.1162/glep\_a\_00544.
- Schneider, Ronald. *"Order and Progress": A Political History of Brazil*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).
- Speth, James Gustave. *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
- Steffen, Will, Katherine Richardson, Johan Rockström, Sarah E. Cornell, Ingo Fetzer, Elena M. Bennett, Reinette Biggs et al. "Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet." *Science* 347 (6223) (2015). DOI 10.1126/science.1259855. This is how *Science* lists the article citation: Cite this article as W. Steffen et al., *Science* 347, 1259855 (2015). DOI: 10.1126/science.1259855.

- Steiner, Achim, Lee A. Kimball, and John Scanlon. "Global Governance for the Environment and the Role of Multilateral Environmental Agreements in Conservation." *Oryx* 37 (2) (2003), 227–237. DOI 10.1017/S0030605303000401.
- Stone, Peter. *Did We Save the Earth at Stockholm?* (London: Earth Island, 1973).
- UN General Assembly. *Institutional and Financial Arrangements for International Environmental Cooperation*, Resolution 2997 (XXVII) (15 December 1972). <https://opil.ouplaw.com/view/10.1093/law-oxio/e430.013.1/law-oxio-e430>.
- US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements. *Participation by the United States in the United Nations Environment Program: Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-Third Congress, first session, on H.R. 5696*. 5 and 10 April 1973 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1973).
- US Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. "Stockholm and Beyond: Report" (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1972).
- World Politics Review. "Are We Witnessing the End of Multilateralism?" 7 February 2020. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27914/are-we-witnessing-the-end-of-multilateralism>.