Environmental Organizations: Changing Roles and Functions in Global Politics

Ludivine Tamiotti and Matthias Finger

Over the past decade, numerous scholars in the areas of the social movement theory, international relations, international political economy, political science, and development studies have drawn attention to the growth of environmental organizations. This growth, they say, is leading to the development of a global civil society\(^1\) and, consequently, to the transformation of the role of the state in world politics. James Rosenau,\(^2\) in particular, considers that the growing number of “sovereignty-free actors” is at the origin of a climate of turbulence that is detrimental to state sovereignty on the international scene. In relation to this, many writers have argued that non-state actors are able to minimize the influence, authority and primacy of states in world politics, within the framework of new global governance mechanisms in which these organizations substantially participate.\(^3\)

Without doubt, this evolution in the literature reflects a corresponding reality. However, the above-mentioned literature may be tainted by wishful thinking. Indeed, it draws an analogy between, on the one hand, the role environmental movements and Green parties have played at the national level, and, on the other hand, the evolving role of environmental organizations at a global level and the corresponding transformation of the state system. This analogy leads to extrapolating political activism at the state level to international politics and policy-making. Yet, such an extrapolation has its conceptual and practical limits. Indeed, although this discourse on the rise of environmental organizations is also paralleled by a discourse on liberalization and deregulation, one has reservations about whether there is an actual decline of state sovereignty in global politics.\(^4\) In the same way, the idea that a new global governance system is emerging, in which non-state actors—and especially environmental organizations—play a key role, has to be analyzed more critically.

For example, one might consider the well-known United Nations Conference for Environment and Development (UNCED) process in which the plan-

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\(^1\) See, for example: Princen and Finger 1994; Lipschutz 2000; and Wapner and Ruiz 2000.
\(^2\) Rosenau 1990.
\(^3\) See, for example: Young 1999a; Vayrynen 1999; and Porter, Brown, and Chasek 2000.
\(^4\) See, for example: Dunn 1995; and Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985.
ners took pride in gathering together a wide representation of environmental organizations. However, a more in-depth study of the UNCED process shows that those organizations have been, to a certain extent, exploited by the process, as well as by powerful states and businesses. Rather than leading towards a new global environmental governance system, environmental organizations were assigned the role of providing information to UNCED and helping it disseminate and, at times, implement its outcomes. At the same time, governments, heavily lobbied by transnational corporations (TNCs), remained in charge of the whole process. By allowing the active involvement of environmental organizations in the UNCED process, the process itself and the governments were to be re-legitimized. However, the argument is not simply one of co-optation of environmental and other organizations. Rather, the intent is to show in this article that the current development of international environmental politics increasingly involves environmental organizations in the policy-making, implementation, and even the monitoring process. As a result, there is certainly an evolution towards new governance mechanisms and partnerships in global environmental politics, but this evolution will take time, and will significantly differ from what is expected and called for by many authors. In other words, this article offers a more realistic and functionalist appreciation of the various roles environmental organizations can and will play in global environmental politics. We think that this more realistic appreciation should replace the somewhat naive idea that environmental organizations are an expression of, and a significant step towards, global governance with NGOs playing the role of the “global citizen.”

In this article, the focus will thus be on the transformation of the role played by environmental organizations in global politics. This analysis will be embedded in a larger framework where conceptions concerning environmental organizations and traditional state politics are introduced with a historical perspective (Section 1). On this basis, a typology will be set up explaining how these environmental organizations came to be (Section 2). To illustrate the widespread change of the role of environmental organizations, a special emphasis will be put on the different activities taken on by these organizations in international environmental agreements (Section 3). The corresponding analysis intends to indicate the extent to which environmental organizations can play a role in global (environmental) governance mechanisms (Section 4), and it will outline the strategy of governments and international institutions in respect to these organizations (Section 5). The concluding section will critically assess the idea of “global environmental governance” (Section 6).

1. The Overall Framework

In this section, the emergence and growing importance of environmental organizations in global politics is placed into a larger framework of growing and
changing ecological concerns, evolving political means to address them, and
overall transformation of the global state system. This comprehensive historical
and contextual framework will allow, in the next section, a more precise analysis
of the different functions environmental organizations play.

Indeed, environmental, or rather, ecological, concerns have significantly
evolved over time, beginning with conservationist ecology in the 19th century,
moving to political ecology in the late 1960s, and leading since the early 1980s
to so-called global ecology. Indeed, conservationist ecology was the prevailing
model and ideology until the period when social movements integrated ecology
into a political framework. To recall, conservationist ecology is concerned with
the preservation of wildlife and its natural habitat. Not surprisingly, this type of
ecology is dominated by natural scientists, and characterized on an institutional
level by nature protection organizations, all of which are located in industrial-
ized countries. At an international level, this vision of ecology is part of a sci-
etic framework originally located within the United Nations Educational, Sci-
cific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In other words, ecology during this
period basically took the form of scientific advice to governments.

In 1968, conservationist ecology was overtaken by political ecology. 1968
was simultaneously the year of the Biosphere Conference (the Intergovernmen-
tal Conference of Experts on the Scientific Basis for Rational Use and Conserva-
tion of the Resources of the Biosphere) organised by UNESCO, and of the be-
ginning of political upheaval in Europe and America. Further, 1972 was the year
of the so-called Stockholm Conference, which was to give birth to the United
Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Consequently, during the 1970s, ecological concern significantly evolved,
as it became embedded in the larger social movement context. As a result, eco-
logical issues and problems were framed mainly in political terms. It is for this
reason that the years between 1968 and 1982 are considered a period of politi-
cal ecology. In fact, political ecology in Europe, due to the influence of the New
Left, was more politicized than it was in the US, where it was framed in counter-
cultural terms. In both cases, however, ecology became closely related to social
movement activism, often at a local level. Moreover, in Europe, political ecology
gave rise to “Green” parties. In contradistinction to conservationist ecology, po-
litical ecology saw ecological problems as much more related to social, political,
and even cultural issues. As such, political ecology developed into the following
three dimensions: (1) a clearly critical look at science and technology, both il-
lustrating the problematic relationship Western civilization entertains with na-
ture; (2) a tendency towards small-scale and local solutions to issues of environ-
ment and development; and (3) a view that saw the state, or more precisely “the
system,” as being oppressive and destructive of nature, a feature most clearly il-
lustrated by nuclear technology. While there was some expertise being devel-

8. See, for example: Manes 1990; Paehlke 1989; and Shabecoff 1993.
oped during this period, most of the energy of the political ecology movement went into the development of anti-systemic behavior and alternatives.

Since the early 1980s, starting with the “nuclear winter theory,” a gradual movement toward global ecology has been underway. Global ecology is less concerned with issues of pollution and localized environmental destruction as in political ecology, or with wildlife and nature protection, as in conservationist ecology. Rather, it is concerned with planetary and long-term trends and phenomena, such as ozone depletion, deforestation, and climate change. Global ecology considers the human causes of these global changes, as well as their impacts on society. While the actors who emerged during the conservationist and the political ecology periods continue to be active at national (Green parties) and at local levels (environmental organizations), new expertise and many new actors have emerged on the scene. Some of these actors have neither background nor experience in ecological issues, as is the case with transnational corporations and other international coordinating agencies. As a matter of fact, global ecology leads to a substantial fragmentation of the environmental community, which is now simultaneously active at international, national, and local levels, and which now also encompasses actors from the private sector.

This structuring of ecological concern into three time-periods, conservationist, political, and global, also corresponds to the changing political instruments for addressing ecological issues and problems. Indeed, a traditional national, and, especially, sector-related approach to environmental protection of the principal natural resources—such as animals, forests, water and soil—changes with the evolution in the early 1970s to political ecology. Political ecology must be seen in the context of the confrontational social movement approach at the national level, where the battle against environmental pollution or destruction, from such sources as nuclear production (civil and military) and toxic waste, is fought. With the emergence of global ecological issues and problems in the 1980s, a more comprehensive approach is necessary, often linking environment and (industrial) development. This latter trend is probably best illustrated by the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development and its resulting conventions on climate change and biodiversity. This shift in the use of political instruments to address environmental issues and problems is not unrelated to a parallel trend of economic, financial, and even cultural globalization. Such globalization, in both the economic and the ecological arenas, pushes the search for new venues and approaches in solving global environmental problems. In doing so, one seeks to include the various stakeholders in the collective problem-solving process, resulting in the emergence, since the 1980s, of the idea of global environmental governance. However, unlike the situation in the conservationist and political ecology eras, environmental organizations are no longer the only stakeholders in solving global ecological prob-

lems. New emerging stakeholders are also business and its lobbying organizations, such as, for example, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the Prince of Wales Business Forum (PWBF).

2. The Evolving Nature of Environmental Organizations

The three time-periods described above reflect not only different views on environmental issues and problems and different political approaches for addressing them, but also different types of organizations. In the first stage, that is before 1968, environmental organizations mainly took the form of nature protection organizations, many of them growing out of bird-protection organizations. The driving forces behind these organizations were essentially natural scientists and naturalists. In the United States, the best known of these organizations are still very active today, such as the Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund, and others. At an international level, one must mention IUCN, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, now called the World Conservation Union, whose roots go back to the 1940s. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), now known as the WorldWide Fund for Nature, grew out of IUCN in 1960 as its fundraising agency. It is important to note that these nature protection organizations still play a very significant role today, especially in international environmental agreements, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and within the framework of the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity. Indeed WWF, IUCN, as well as Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce (TRAFFIC), take an active part in implementing the CITES agreement. For example, they collect information on world trade in wildlife and transmit this for analysis to the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit (WTMU), which is part of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC). By monitoring the above-mentioned trade closely, this network of environmental organizations is able to assist the CITES Secretariat in spotting problem areas and promoting remedial action. WWF also provides funds to law enforcement agencies to improve implementation of CITES, and it is placing pressure on governments of countries and territories of key concern to stop the illegal trade.

During the second stage, that is basically during the 1970s (1968–1982), a new type of environmental organization was clearly emerging. These were activist organizations growing out of social movements in Europe and America. In the beginning, these organizations took the form of grassroots groups opposing the “system,” the “establishment,” or government in general, as well as business and industry on issues such as nuclear energy, civil and military pollution, and polluting technologies. The main characteristics of this green movement were its lack of well-established structures and its oppositional nature. Its activities were largely limited to the national level. In the late 1970s, the green movement started to institutionalize in two different ways: on the national level, especially
in Europe, parts of the green movement were transformed into green parties.11 On an international level, one can observe, since the 1970s, the emergence of green movement organizations, such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), or the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) to name some of those that are still known today. During the same period of time, and along the same political and ideological lines, a similar movement emerged in the developing countries. This movement was often linked to newly acquired independence, and the promotion of self-reliant, participatory, and alternative forms of development.12 This was particularly the case in Africa and Southeast Asia.13 Towards the end of the 1970s, this more development-oriented movement was also institutionalized into various, often local, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Even though during the UNCED process, the term NGO defined every non-state actor, including transnational corporations (TNCs), the term NGO is used here very restrictively to define only environment-and-development organizations at the local and regional levels in developing countries. This is to distinguish social movement organizations in the South (i.e., NGOs) from social movement organizations in the North, as well as from other environmental organizations. However, there has been very little institutionalization of these kinds of NGOs at an international level. One might mention here the examples of Environmental Development Action in the Third World (ENDA Third World), Development Alternatives (India), and the Institute for Development Alternatives (IFDA), which has disappeared since, but which throughout the 1980s was an important voice of the Third World movement.

Since the early 1980s, that is, during the stage of “global ecology,” yet another type of environmental organization emerged, namely the global environmental organization. These organizations had neither a clear political agenda, as was the case in the social movement organizations of the previous stage, nor did they have a clear focus on nature protection and conservation. One must mention organizations such as the Worldwatch Institute (WWI), the World Resources Institute (WRI), the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the Earth Council, and many others. Many of these organizations embraced the broad agenda resulting from the UNCED process (Agenda 21), or pieces of it, pertaining to particular issues, such as biodiversity, climate change, desertification, deforestation, and so on. The main characteristic of the environmental organizations emerging since the 1980s at an international level is their focus on the link between environment and (industrial) development, as well as the importance given to documentation and information, often with the ambition of advising international policy-makers. Members of these organizations are often neither naturalists nor activists, but rather scientists of a new kind (such as oceanographers, climatologists and geologists), as well as professionals.

11. See, for example: Mueller-Rommel 1989; and Spretnak and Capra 1984.
13. See, for example: Burkey 1993; and Wignaraja 1994.
or managers from the private sector. For many of them, work in these organizations has become a professional career. Generally, these global environmental organizations have their origins and are located in industrialized countries, even though one can increasingly find them also in developing countries (e.g., Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan, or Tata Energy Research Institute, India).

The term “environmental organizations” is used to describe all of these (nature protection, activist and global environment) organizations that are active today at local, national, regional and international levels. Some reflect conservationist, some political, and others technocratic ideals. Some have their roots in the natural sciences, others in activism, and still others in the global conference circuit. Their approaches to addressing environmental issues and problems are equally diverse. In order to better understand what these organizations do in the international environmental arena, it is important to analyze their functions in international environmental politics and policy-making.

3. The Growing Role of Environmental Organizations in Global Politics

Indeed, in recent years a range of environmental organizations, be they conservationist, political, or global in orientation, have become an essential part of international environmental politics and are active in different stages of the political process. As a result, environmental organizations of various kinds have been incorporated into most environmental negotiations and treaties. At the same time, ensuring compliance by states with their international environmental obligations has become a matter of growing concern to national governments. In this respect, modern international environmental treaties frequently include provisions for implementation as well as monitoring mechanisms, which open up considerable space for environmental organizations. As a result, these organizations have been progressively incorporated into international politics, where they play mainly three different functions: (1) participation in the international environmental decision-making processes; (2) participation in the implementation of environmental agreements; and (3) the monitoring of the compliance of states’ activities and rules with such international environmental agreements. The treatment of such participation at different stages of the policy process should lead to a more realistic assessment of the different functions of international environmental organizations.

Environmental organizations, especially nature protection organizations, social movement organizations, and even more so, global environmental organizations, are becoming increasingly important and active in the international policy-making process at two levels, that is before and during international negotiations. Indeed, thanks to the information collected and the scientific studies

carried out, such environmental organizations are able to identify emerging issues and then put pressure on governments to negotiate corresponding agreements. In this regard, these organizations play a significant role in stimulating environmental treaties. For example, IUCN was there at the drafting of the CITES Convention, and it played an important role in the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity. Moreover, environmental organizations played a significant role in the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (Madrid 1991), which has four detailed annexes dealing with environmental impact assessment, conservation of flora and fauna, waste disposal and marine pollution. In short, some environmental organizations do exert a direct influence on the decision-making processes leading up to international environmental agreements.

But they also play an important role during the negotiations. Since UNCED has created a space for NGO participation, a number of UN conferences and international institutions have introduced environmental organizations into the very process of negotiation. Subsequently, representatives of environmental organizations have been included since in states’ delegations, as, for instance, in the negotiations for the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. Another example of the increasing influence of environmental organizations can be found during the second meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol (1989) to the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer (1985) in June 1990, where representatives of 93 environmental and citizens’ groups from 27 countries met in London and issued a joint statement aimed at persuading governments to strengthen the treaty. Moreover, more or less the same group of environmental organizations has participated actively in the climate negotiations. In 1992, during the Climate Change Convention negotiations, a large number of such organizations monitored the debates, distributed materials, lobbied delegations, and then tried to influence the negotiators. During these negotiations, the Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development (FIELD), an environmental organization based in London, advised a group of island states and served as a member of their delegations. Further, at the 1996 Conference of the Parties to the UN Climate Change Convention, more than 500 representatives of environmental organizations took part in the debate.

However, the resources these environmental organizations have for the international decision-making processes are not unlimited. As a result, most of these organizations usually focus on selected issues, and only the biggest ones

15. See Tarlock 1993; and Raustiala 1997a.
can take part in the majority of environmental negotiations. Indeed, environmental organizations are obliged to single out their priorities, which often depend on their political agendas, on media interest, and on available funds. Overall, environmental organizations were more focused on UNCED and the Climate Change Convention, than, for example, on the Biodiversity Convention. The WWF was, in fact, the only such organization to attend almost all meetings of the Biodiversity Convention. Other organizations, such as the World Conservation Monitoring Centre and the World Resources Institute took part in some of the meetings, while Greenpeace, for example, only attended the last meeting. Indeed, as will be shown later, environmental organizations increasingly have to think strategically, not only when it comes to the issues they focus on, but also when it comes to the type of function they want to play in international environmental politics.

When seeking to influence the policy-making process at the international level, environmental organizations are increasingly in direct competition with another type of actor. Indeed, large transnational corporations (TNCs) often have more funds at their disposal than many governments, let alone environmental organizations. In addition, TNCs are increasingly organizing themselves into structured institutions, such as the World Business Council on Sustainable Development, whose aim, like that of environmental organizations, is to shape international environmental policy-making. Finally, we must mention that business and industry have come to financially support nature protection organizations, and even more so global environmental organizations, which are thus in danger of becoming quite dependent on such support. The question therefore arises as to how environmental organizations can uphold an environmental agenda when their own financial survival depends, to a growing extent, on the support of those corporations.

Clearly, some environmental organizations play an essential role in promoting new priorities in international politics due to their progressive incorporation into international decision-making mechanisms. In this respect, environmental organizations, to a certain extent, play the role of pressure groups, but this time at an international level and within the mechanisms defined by states.

Implementation refers to the measures taken to make international accords effective at the national and local levels. And helping to implement such international accords already is, and increasingly will become, a significant activity for certain types of environmental organizations, especially NGOs (as defined above) and social movement organizations in developing countries. Indeed, modern international environmental treaties usually include provisions for their implementation. Such provisions can be found in treaties such as CITES (1973), the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife.

and Natural Habitats (1979), the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1990), and the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (1992). To some extent, all international environmental agreements provide for the participation of environmental organizations in the implementation process. In this respect, the World Heritage Convention (1972) was the first one to give to three such organizations (among them IUCN) ofﬁcial status as advisors and to authorize them to become instruments “for the implementation of its programs and projects”.

To recall, implementation is often brokered by international institutions, which at times even bypass states. The World Bank, for example, increasingly seeks to incorporate environmental concerns into development programs, as well as to take advantage of the private sector’s abilities and resources to support environmental protection.25 Furthermore, the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), as the main ﬁnancial agency for environmental protection within the World Bank system, co-ﬁnances activities supported by recipient and donor governments and international organizations, and such support can go both to local and private sector organizations, such as TNCs.26 The grants and concessional funds disbursed by the GEF complement traditional development assistance by covering the additional costs incurred when a development project also includes global environmental objectives. In addition, the GEF also serves as the interim ﬁnancial mechanism for the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Indeed, the main implementation role actually takes place at the local level, and is in fact part of the broader agenda which, as a result of UNCED, seeks to make development more sustainable.27 This role is assumed by typical nongovernmental organizations, whose origins can be traced back, as said above, to social movement organizations of the 1970s in developing countries. As a matter of fact, such organizations are increasingly becoming part of the GEF’s, the World Bank’s and regional development banks’ implementation strategies, for example, through the Small Grants Program (SGP) mechanism. SGP supports community-based activities by grassroots organizations and NGOs in developing countries. Hence, the GEF seems to give consideration to local organizations in developing countries more for their skills and resources in the implementation of environmental agreements, than for their potential input into GEF’s projects. This involvement of NGOs in the GEF’s implementation strategy is paralleled by the World Bank’s special effort to engage local organizations in its operations, given their presence in the ﬁeld and their ﬁrst-hand knowledge. Hence, local organizations represent 70 percent of NGOs involved in World Bank-ﬁnanced projects.28 In other words, one can see here the extent to which local NGOs in developing countries have actually become

27. See Adams 1992; Farington and Bebbington 1993; and Fisher 1997.
key instruments in the implementation of international environmental agreements.

Compliance is a step beyond implementation, as compliance refers to whether states adhere to the provisions of the accord and to the implementing measures that they have instituted. As a result, monitoring and controlling compliance is more demanding than simply evaluating implementation. Often compliance, and how to monitor it, is already defined in international agreements. Again, environmental organizations, especially nature protection and social movement organizations, play a significant role here.

For example, WWF is in charge of a number of monitoring projects pertaining to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and to CITES. To recall, 221 environmental organizations participated in the 1995 CITES session of the Conference of the Parties held in Florida. But these organizations not only assist in the meetings, but they also take part in evaluating the performance of the CITES objectives. For example, during the 10th meeting of the Conference of the Parties held in Harare (Zimbabwe) in June 1997, Parties recognized that the Bad Ivory Database System (BIDS), established by TRAFFIC in 1992, had been particularly useful in assessing ivory trade development. They also agreed that all CITES Parties should provide information about ivory seizures to TRAFFIC for inclusion in its database. One should note that the provisions of the CITES Convention are almost identical to those of the Montreal Protocol quoted below (cf. CITES, article XI-7), and also widely referred to by environmental organizations. Other examples of environmental organizations' participation in compliance mechanisms can be found with the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, with regard to the monitoring of the implementation of Action 21. This Commission has indeed offered environmental organizations a direct channel for providing reports to Secretariats, as well as for having those reports incorporated in evaluating compliance or non-compliance.

The institution in charge of monitoring, implementation and compliance is ordinarily the Conference of the Parties. Here, environmental organizations play a crucial role, especially when they have observer status. For instance, article 11 (5) of the Montreal Protocol says: “any body or agency, whether national or international, governmental or nongovernmental, qualified in fields relating to the protection of the ozone layer which has informed the secretariat of its wish to be represented at a meeting of the Parties as an observer may be admitted unless at least one third of the Parties present object.” As another example, the 1992 Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Northeast Atlantic also provides in its Article 11 for access of environmental organizations to the Conference of the Parties. Providing the Conference of Parties with independent information on compliance is indeed an increasingly impor-

tant function played by environmental organizations. It is clearly a different function than the one of feeding into the decision-making process and the other of implementing international environmental agreements. Unlike these two, it is also a function, which, in theory at least, requires environmental organizations to be independent of states and donors.

This independence is further strengthened as environmental organizations develop their own credible reporting system. Reporting is a mechanism that is well-known in the field of human rights. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, for example, have played major roles in verifying compliance with human rights agreements. Most modern environmental agreements expressly require parties to report certain information to the international organization or the secretariat concerned. This involves various statistics, information on implementation measures that should have been adopted, scientific information, and information on breaches or violations by persons under the jurisdiction of the state. Even if not directly asked to do this, many environmental organizations are indeed acting as watchdogs in the implementation of treaty provisions. This is particularly so in the case of the nature protection and even more so of the social movement organizations of industrialised countries, such as WWF, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

The general role played by environmental organizations in international politics has been summarized as identifying environmental issues, acting as the guardian of the environment by using the public, exerting diplomatic and political pressure, drafting or influencing the drafting of international environmental standards, enforcing environmental protection provisions, and acting in advisory capacities to international treaties and institutions.32 Actually, all of these roles can be categorized into the three above-discussed functions, occurring at three different stages of environmental politics: the decision-making function, the implementation function, and, increasingly, the monitoring of compliance function. The last one is, in our view, the most promising, but also the most challenging function for environmental organizations in the future. Table No.1 shows the major engagements of the different types of environmental organizations with regard to the three functions.

As a conclusion, we can state that today’s global environmental politics provide three types of opportunities for environmental organizations. The extent to which environmental organizations are capable of actually taking advantage of these opportunities depends, among other things, on their history and their strategic outlook. It depends also on the strategies of governments and other international actors, that is, on what functions they ultimately want environmental organizations to play. The following section will first present the strategies of environmental organizations in respect to these functions, and it will also discuss the strategies governments pursue with regard to environmental organizations.

4. Strategies of Environmental Organizations in Global Politics

This section will focus on the political roles of environmental organizations only, leaving somewhat aside the fact that many of these organizations also have other functions, such as awareness raising and community building. We have presented, above, how environmental organizations have emerged and evolved over time. In doing so, we have schematically distinguished between nature conservation, social movement (North and South), and global environmental organizations. All of them today seek to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them in the area of international environmental politics. In particular, all of them, except perhaps for local organizations in developing countries, aspire to influence international environmental politics. Also, nature protection organizations along with social movement organizations and NGOs in the South, are particularly involved in the implementation of environmental accords and sustainable development projects. And environmental organizations with a political and scientific background seem especially well positioned to play a role in monitoring compliance of such accords. Whether they can actually play these functions depends on a variety of factors, including their visibility, their capability, and their financial resources.

Indeed, playing these different functions is also a matter of recognition and power. Consequently, many environmental organizations seek international visibility, for example, by participating in international conventions and conferences. Procedural actions, such as getting accredited and preparing papers for meetings, become more and more a concern to them, as such participation in international fora provides environmental organizations with additional legitimacy, and, as a result, with more funds. In fact, donors feel more confident with environmental organizations whose legitimacy has been recognised by established international institutions and other donors. But more generally, all

Table 1
Types and Functions of Environmental Organizations

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<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Decision-making</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th>Monitoring compliance</th>
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<td>Nature protection organization</td>
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<td>Social movement organization (Industrialised countries)</td>
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<td>Social movement organization (Developing countries)</td>
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<td>Global environmental organizations</td>
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environmental organizations, in one way or another, have to be visible if they want to play a role in international environmental decision-making, as well as in monitoring compliance.

The involvement of environmental organizations in politics is generally well explained by an analysis of their “capability.” Such capability is in turn strongly linked to resources, such as membership and available financial and human resources, but it is also dependent on expertise, political autonomy, and communication technology. And capability, of course, determines strategy. As a result, environmental organizations with a global network tend to be more active in the negotiation process. Others, which have a strong local network, are more active in the area of implementation. Organizations with strength in expertise, such as nature protection organizations, seek to play a role in the area of monitoring compliance, but also in the area of international environmental decision-making.

Furthermore, the cost of participating in international environmental politics is also a crucial point for environmental organizations. Concretely, such participation implies frequent travels to Geneva, Nairobi or New York. As a result, rich organizations can be present in every strategic place, whereas poorer ones are not always able to express their views in the main international fora. Moreover, the use of communication technologies has substantially strengthened the global environmental organizations of industrialized countries, such as the World Resources Institute or the Worldwatch Institute, to the detriment of developing countries and political organizations, which are not always capable of attracting funds from business and other donors.

Such financial power must often be weighed against considerations of independence and, therefore, ultimately credibility. Indeed, one of the main sources of legitimacy of environmental organizations, especially when it comes to serious input into the negotiation process, but also when it comes to monitoring of compliance, is their freedom to express international public opinion. In other words, their intellectual autonomy and credibility is built up over time, and must be managed by these organizations in the same way as any other resource. But such credibility is not only related to financial independence from TNCs or donor agencies, for example. It also depends upon the relationship environmental organizations have with their respective governments. For example, it is well known that the Third World Network, a developing countries’ advocacy organization, has a link with the Malaysian government.

5. Strategies of Governments and International Institutions in Respect to Environmental Organizations

As said above, governments and international institutions increasingly consider environmental organizations as important actors in international policy-
making, implementation and compliance. Yet, or perhaps just because of that, their attitude towards these organizations is more and more a strategic one. Indeed, although governments and international institutions need environmental organizations in order to fulfil the three above-identified functions in international environmental politics, they also want to stay in control of the overall process.

Indeed, it appears that states are quite selective when it comes to letting environmental organizations have access to international environmental institutions and decision-making. Admittedly, international institutions, conferences and negotiations slowly open up to what they call “NGO participation.” But states do retain their autonomy of negotiation through “corridor diplomacy.” In fact, owing to environmental organizations’ presence, there is an official diplomacy, which involves states and civil actors, and an unofficial one reserved to state representatives. Indeed, governments still carry out informal talks outside the scrutiny of environmental organizations. Similar observations can be made for international organizations such as the World Bank and the GEF when it comes to accrediting and using environmental organizations for the implementation of environmental agreements.

The next step in this instrumentalization process is the management of environmental organizations’ participation in the negotiations, where these organizations have access. Indeed, access does not necessarily mean participation. Information is one of the tools that allow environmental organizations to take an active part in the negotiation process. In today’s complex world, the control of information and information sources seems to be the key, and some global environmental organizations are often better informed about global environmental issues and problems than most governments. This is particularly true of global expertise, which many national governments lack but international environmental organizations increasingly have. In addition, nature conservation and social movement organizations are better able to portray themselves as guardians of environmental values, which national governments appear not to be able or willing to protect. Furthermore, the information provided by such organizations constitutes an essential advantage for national governments, and this is, moreover, information freely obtained. By using this information, governments can maximise policy information and research while minimizing expenditures. In fact, many environmental organizations provide continuity in international environmental policy-making, which cannot be obtained either through international conferences, or through national policies. Also, the worldwide network provided especially by global environmental organizations is particularly useful for the implementation of and compliance with environmental accords. For all these reasons, governments keep an eye on environmental organizations and use them whenever they are useful for their agenda.

34. Raustiala 1997b, 733.
35. Ibid., 727.
As a consequence, many countries now involve representatives of relevant environmental organizations in their own delegations. Some of them are even allowed to take part in the drafting of conference agendas, in meetings of the Parties, and, in fact, in every forum usually left to the discretion of the state. This is a special chance for developing countries, which often lack financial as well as human resources. Environmental organizations can even provide them with ideas and infrastructure in order to make their voice heard on an international level. For example, in the context of Climate Change negotiations, the environmental organization FIELD provides the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) with advice and legal expertise. As a consequence, AOSIS has quite unexpectedly had an important influence in the Climate Change process, and recently proposed a new protocol developed in cooperation with FIELD.

In short, both the participation in international environmental decision-making and the implementation of international environmental accords are now again well under the control of states and international organizations such as the World Bank. Only the function of monitoring compliance still seems to escape international policymakers. Not astonishingly, it is this function that social movement organizations today feel most attracted to.

6. Theoretical Considerations and Conclusion

In the previous section, we have, from the perspective of global politics, framed the evolving relationship among environmental organizations, states and intergovernmental institutions as being an increasingly strategic one, where states seek to instrumentalize environmental organizations in order to prevail, while environmental organizations seek to take over functions previously held by states. Moreover, this evolving relationship between states and NGOs must be understood within the larger context of globalization, where all these actors now start to play on a global (playing) field, and thus increasingly have to keep an eye on each other. More precisely, this strategic relationship is of course also a direct result of the globalization of environmental issues and problems, which leads states and international organizations to look out for new ways and means to address these unprecedented global environmental issues. In this respect, the United Nations, for example, has invented the new mechanism of Global Summits to address not only environment and development, but also social development, population, and women’s issues. Governments have an interest in locating some environmental issues and problems at a global level both for economic and for political reasons. There is, indeed, an incentive to settle some environmental problems collectively, particularly because of the costs implied by environmental protection measures. States are also willing to operate at a global scale, as they do not want to incur competitive disadvantages as a result of unilateral environmental protection. Some global environmental

36. Ibid., 728.
issues, especially after the UNCED process, also allow them to address development problems and South-North relations. But, the stake is also political, given the fact that such far-reaching issues are difficult to legitimize before the national citizens. Finally, the global scale has the advantage of diluting responsibilities among actors, another factor encouraging politicians to participate in global actions.

For environmental organizations in turn, the global arena is a unique opportunity to participate in power, where at a national level they have to operate through political parties and other institutionalized mechanisms. Also, where governments, because of their national sovereignty, are seen as obstacles to solving global environmental and other problems, environmental organizations have an opportunity to offer themselves as solutions. Their competitive advantage vis-à-vis states is their ability to perform, on a global scale, many of the tasks governments assume at the national level, that is, policy innovation, the provision of expertise, implementation, and even monitoring of compliance. In addition, environmental organizations, in part because of the absence of elected representatives at the global level, have managed to portray themselves as the global environmental conscience, as well as providers of information and publicity in environment-related matters. The involvement of environmental organizations in decision-making mechanisms provides international negotiations with innovative ideas, efficient methods, and determined positions, which are all absolutely essential for carrying out effective agreements. Finally, environmental organizations have become recognised for their positive role in implementing the environment and development agenda, as well as for their agenda-setting function.

It therefore seems to us that this new arena of international environmental politics can be characterized by a certain mutual dependency between states and their international institutions, on the one hand, and environmental organizations on the other. The terms “governance” or “global governance” have been used to account for this interdependent and mutually beneficial relationship among various actors. However, this term does not really account for the inherently strategic nature of this relationship, as it is a term that suggests harmony and common interest. Moreover, this relationship of mutual dependency is not a peaceful, and probably not even a stable one. Indeed, on the one hand, governments seek to control these increasingly powerful non-state actors, while on the other hand, some environmental organizations in turn seek to impose their agenda on governments and international institutions. As a result, the relationship between states and environmental organizations remains an ambiguous one: States indeed allow environmental organizations to exert pressure, yet within an increasingly well-established and controlled framework. They are, of course, aware that environmental organizations are bound to become key actors on the international scene. Therefore, governments have re-shaped the old
model of international politics (i.e. state-centric) into a new institutional forum within which they are still able to maintain control over international politics. Accreditation, selective participation, and subsidization are all means by which governments try to remain in charge. Environmental organizations, of course, know this. Indeed, their involvement in international institutions and structures provides them with an opportunity to influence decision-making processes and outcomes while increasing their visibility, but it also leads to a risk of co-optation not only by governments, but also by multilateral actors and TNCs.  

From a purely strategic point of view, states and international institutions probably have an interest in limiting the role of environmental organizations to the input and implementation functions, while keeping the function of monitoring compliance to themselves, or to other organizations. On the other hand, environmental organizations, again from a purely strategic point of view, will seek, if they can, to step up their role in monitoring compliance, as this gives them a much more independent position from which they can oversee what governments do. And they could even further enhance their position vis-à-vis governments and international organizations, if they managed to become involved in standards setting and norms definition, for example, through organizations that are basically out of the control of governments such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). In this way—that is, by setting the standards and by monitoring compliance with these standards—they would in turn be able to “instrumentalize” the states. This is the strategy pursued by transnational corporations, which are heavily involved in setting standards, while they also financially support and perhaps even seek to instrumentalize the global environmental organizations that would monitor compliance with those very standards.

In short, it seems that it would be more accurate to conceptualize the complex interplay between states and international institutions, on the one hand, and environmental organizations, on the other, as a strategic relationship of interested actors, rather than as a harmonious governance mechanism. Indeed, it seems to us that such a conceptualization would explain the outcomes of international environmental politics much better than does the concept of global governance.

References

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