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# The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution

## UNEP at Fifty

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# PREFACE

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Anniversaries offer opportunities to reflect on the past and imagine the future. In 2022, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) turns fifty and has a chance to reinvent itself. Created to “divert operating agencies into environmental ways, to color their programs environmental,” how has UNEP done so far, and what should it do differently?<sup>1</sup> Who can cause that change, and how can they do so? These questions have defined my work as a student and a scholar for over twenty years.

I entered the field of global environmental governance at the very start of the reform process of international environmental governance, in 1997. A graduate student at Yale University pursuing master’s degrees in international relations and environmental policy (because international environmental policy did not exist as a field at the time), I became an advocate for a global environmental organization. My advisor, Professor Daniel Esty, had received a grant from the MacArthur Foundation to launch a debate about the institutional design for global environmental policy. He asked me to assist.

Born and raised in Bulgaria, I had arrived in the United States only five years earlier, in 1992, to study at Mount Holyoke College. My role was therefore that of an apprentice—learning the substance, managing the process, running the logistics. Yet, Dan Esty gave me the opportunity and responsibility to co-create the first Global Environmental Governance

Dialogue. We brought together many of the founders and leaders in the global environmental governance system itself—Maurice Strong, Peter Thacher, Alicia Bárcena, Julia Marton-Lefèvre, Alvaro Umaña, Michael Gusovsky, and Makarim Wibisono, among others. The discussions were thought-provoking and invigorating, and we saw potential for a sustained and expanding dialogue. We managed to deliver the event at half the projected cost, which allowed us to launch the Global Environmental Governance Project and to host annual dialogues. Dan Esty joked for a long time that it was my Eastern European background that made this initiative of bringing rigorous academic analysis into policy sustainable.

We argued explicitly for the creation of a Global Environmental Organization to address failed collective action on environmental concerns and to overcome institutional fragmentation. Such an organization, we contended, would have greater authority and legitimacy and thus function more effectively than UNEP. As political debates intensified in the run-up to the 2002 Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development, we produced a co-edited volume, *Global Environmental Governance: Options and Opportunities*, which featured scholars and practitioners from around the world.<sup>2</sup> Arguments for and against a World Environment Organization were becoming more heated, and since I had begun a PhD program at Yale, I decided to explore why we did not have such an organization. Why was UNEP created as a subsidiary body, a programme, in 1972? What was the original vision? Did the founders of UNEP miss this important detail, or was the programme deliberately designed, as some scholars argued, in order to incapacitate it? Having engaged with many of the people who were present at the programme's creation, I simply was not convinced by the theory of deliberate deficiency.

I therefore ventured into the UN archives and the offices and living rooms of many of the people who had created the major institutions for environmental governance. I pieced together a story that was quite different from what I had read in my textbooks. And as I continued to engage in policy discussions, I witnessed policymakers grappling with the same questions the founders of UNEP had tackled in the 1970s: What are the key functions of an environmental governance system at the global level? Can existing institutions be improved to address these functions, or is a new body required? What is the best institutional design, and how can we

ensure that it will work? What is the relationship between environmental and development goals, and how should the institution be governed? Over time, as I unearthed the story of UNEP's creation and operation, my argument changed.

UNEP, I found, was not deficient by design, and its limiting factor was not its structure. Transforming it into a specialized agency, a World or Global Environmental Organization, therefore, would not address the underlying problems. I had proven myself wrong and identified the flaws in the proposals of several governments. I set out to discover how and why UNEP had performed the way it did through empirical and engaged research.

In 2004, as a doctoral student, I co-taught a class about UNEP with Mohamed El-Ashry of the Global Environment Facility and Professor Gordon Geballe, at the request of Gus Speth, who was then the dean of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. We undertook the first university-led evaluation of UNEP, and I am grateful to the many UNEP staff who made our analysis possible. Jacob Duer was our UNEP focal point, Kati Autere ensured we had what we needed, and Deputy Executive Director Shafqat Kakakhel engaged with the students and encouraged our thinking. In 2005, thanks to the generosity of Yale alumnus Jim Leitner, the entire class traveled to Kenya to present our evaluation to environment ministers at the UNEP Governing Council. Executive Director Klaus Töpfer hosted us and welcomed the analysis. Our report, *Can the Anchor Hold? Rethinking the UN Environment Programme for the 21st Century*,<sup>3</sup> was possible because of the assistance of numerous UNEP officials who would continue to support my analysis for many years to come.

Understanding the richness and complexity of UNEP's Nairobi location would not have been possible without the hospitality and generosity of Professor Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement, one of the most prominent grassroots women's organizations in the world. Wangari had just learned that she was the recipient of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, the first environmentalist to receive this honor, and yet she found the time to work with us and inspire us. We spent a week with a local community learning about life in Kenya. Transcending the realities of high-level politics, this local work inspired us all and launched many environmental careers. Subsequently, I organized similar trips as a faculty at the College of

William & Mary and the University of Massachusetts Boston. The opportunity to be both “environmentalists in heels” and “environmentalists in Birkenstocks,” my students reflected, shaped their future trajectories. I continued to convene, reflect, write, and engage, and when the environmental governance reform process rekindled in 2006, the Global Environmental Governance Project had become a trusted partner. A few years later, it transformed into the Center for Governance and Sustainability at UMass Boston when I joined the faculty of the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the university.

History is made of stories about the influence of individuals and institutions. This book is a tribute to the collective wisdom of the women and men committed to solving environmental problems and working through international institutions to do so. Professor Oran Young’s suggestion to explore the leadership of UNEP as an explanatory variable sparked the idea to convene all of UNEP’s executive directors with whom I had interacted since the start of the reform process. They had never before been in the same room discussing the past, present, and potential of the organization. With generous support from the UN Foundation, thanks to Mohamed El-Ashry, from the governments of Switzerland (thanks to Ambassador Franz Perrez), Germany (thanks to Stephan Contius), the Horn of Africa Regional Environment Centre and Network in Ethiopia (thanks to Professor Araya Asfaw), and the UN Institute for Training and Research (thanks to Carlos Lopes), in 2009, we convened a rare gathering, the Global Environmental Governance Forum in Glion, Switzerland. The Forum brought together for the first and only time all five consecutive executive directors of UNEP until that date: Maurice Strong, Mostafa Tolba, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Klaus Töpfer, and Achim Steiner. Eighty global environmental leaders, including founders and directors of key international institutions and emerging young leaders, gathered to reflect on the past and envision the future. I am grateful to Julia Marton-Lefèvre, who hosted an elegant celebration of Maurice Strong’s eightieth birthday back-to-back with the Forum, thus providing a compelling reason for many dignitaries to engage in both events.

Ambassador John W. McDonald’s narrative of the original vision for a new international environmental organization and his account of the



**0.1** Ambassador John W. McDonald (left) with Ambassador Lumumba Di-Aping (right) and emerging leaders at the 2009 Global Environmental Governance Forum in Glion, Switzerland.

decisions on UNEP's location in Nairobi struck us all. The stories of Bill Ruckelshaus, the first Administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency; of Ambassador Lars-Göran Engfeldt who was Sweden's Liaison Officer at the 1972 Stockholm Conference; of Jim MacNeill, the Secretary General of the 1987 Brundtland Commission; of Michael Zammit Cutajar, the first Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); of Yolanda Kakabadse, President of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and later of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF); of Ambassador Peter Maurer, Co-chair of the UN General Assembly's environmental governance reform process; and of Ambassador Lumumba Di-Aping, Chair of the G-77, who would become Co-chair of the Copenhagen climate COP a few months later, painted a complex picture of ambitious vision, limited capacity, strained connectivity, and missed opportunities. The dialogue in Glion broke boundaries and forged lasting connections. It led to national dialogues on global environmental governance in Argentina, China, Nepal, Ethiopia, and Uganda hosted by young emerging leaders.

In so many ways, Ambassador John W. McDonald is at the core of this book. The Glion forum was a manifestation of his credo—“sit down face to face and talk”—and his insights reminded us all that individuals imagine institutions, create, and change them. Collaboration with Ambassador McDonald and his wife Christel McDonald, former European civil servant and a historical researcher in conflict resolution, continued much beyond the forum. Every year at UMass Boston, we bestow the Ambassador John W. McDonald award for leadership and innovation in global governance and conflict resolution. The graduate students who receive the award will continue the spirit and ambition of Ambassador McDonald as they grow their leadership potential.

Through the leadership profiles of the executive directors, this book brings the individual into the institutional analysis and highlights the challenges and opportunities during their era. I am grateful to Christiana Figueres, who inspired the work on the leadership profiles, and to Ehsan Masood, who encouraged me to interview the bosses’ bosses—the UN Secretaries-General. My thoughtful conversations with Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon, and Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, who is responsible for the sustainable development agenda for UN Secretary-General António Guterres, deepened the analysis.

I am thankful to the nearly two hundred individuals, current and former UNEP staff members, government representatives, intergovernmental organization officials, and civil society representatives for the formal interviews and countless informal dialogues that contribute to this book’s rich empirical depiction of the past fifty years of UNEP’s history. Many agreed to be quoted in the book, for which I am grateful. The Cast of Characters section provides an overview of the women and men whose voices appear several times throughout the narrative and illustrates their relationship to and perspective on UNEP. For others, identities remain protected and a random three-digit reference is used in place of a name. Many are not quoted directly, but their input informed the narrative. My insights from participation in UNEP’s Governing Council since 2001 and in the UN Environment Assembly sessions complement the interviews. In collaboration with the Federal Office for the Environment of Switzerland, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the government of Finland,

our team has continued to convene and engage policymakers. Through the Global Environmental Dialogues over the past twenty years, we have created a powerful network of committed individuals whose encouragement has been indispensable.

I am also thankful to the institutions that enabled and supported my work throughout the years. First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Mount Holyoke College. In 1991, inspiring each other to do the impossible, a number of us high-school seniors in Bulgaria applied to college in the United States. Against impossible odds, I received a full scholarship to Mount Holyoke College and had the freedom to pursue any scholarly endeavor I could imagine. Having interviewed so many luminaries, I have noticed a pattern in personal stories. “How did you become interested in this field of study?” I would ask. And the answer, 80 percent of the time, points to a professor in college. My story is no different. In the spring semester of 1993, my interest in international environmental policy was sparked in a course on Scandinavian government and politics that I took with Professor Eric Einhorn at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. And, over the years, my professors—Penny Gill and Catherine LeGouis at Mount Holyoke College; Jim Cathey, Erik Einhorn, and Peter Haas at UMass Amherst; and Katarina Eckerberg at Umeå University in Sweden—reinforced the drive to learn more, do better, and make an impact.

Second, at Yale University, my desire to bridge science and policy blossomed and faculty and staff enabled me to engage meaningfully at the intersection of the two. I am grateful to Yale for opening an unimaginable breadth of opportunities, and to my mentors there—Dan Esty, Ben Cashore, Gus Speth, Gordon Geballe, Marian Chertow, Brad Gentry, and John Wargo—for helping me go the extra mile. The Rev. Albert P. Nielson Environmental Ethics Award and the Teresa Heinz Scholarship for Environmental Research supported my work as a master’s student. The Yale Center for the Study of Globalization Dissertation Research Award, the Globalization and Self-Determination Project Dissertation Fellowship, and the Academic Council for the UN System Dissertation Award supported much of my doctoral research work.

In 2005, when I joined the Department of Government at the College of William & Mary, I joined a community of scholars who engaged



actively with theory and practice. The Woodrow Wilson Center Fellowship in 2009–2010 was critical to the convening of the 2009 Global Environmental Governance Forum and the analysis of the outcomes that constitute an important part of this book. The 2015 Andrew Carnegie Fellowship was instrumental to finalizing the manuscript.

At UMass Boston, I have found an institutional home supportive of scholarship with impact, and I am grateful to my colleagues in the Department of Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance and the McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies. Craig Murphy's work on the history of the UN Development Programme had been an inspiration since I was a graduate student and working with him to create a new PhD program in global governance and human security was truly an honor and a privilege. Provost Winston Langley, Dean Steve Crosby, Dean Ira Jackson, and Dean David Cash encouraged and supported my work at the science-policy interface and stood up for me when political interests challenged some academic findings. The Center for Collective Intelligence at MIT provided the institutional home where I could complete the manuscript, and I am grateful to its Director, Professor Tom Malone, and its Executive Director, Kathleen Kennedy, for continuing to engage me as a visiting scholar.

This book has taken several different forms and its completion involved the artistry of many people. The dissertation that I defended in 2006 bears little resemblance to what is now in your hands, but it sparked my passion for UNEP. My dissertation committee members, Professors Daniel Esty, Benjamin Cashore, Frances Rosenbluth, and Paul Wapner, guided the work that still continues to inspire me. I am grateful for the care and encouragement from my friends Anne Rademacher, Arman Grigorian, Carolyn Deere Birkbeck, Christiane Ehringhaus, Irina Faion, Marina Campos, Melissa Goodall, Monica Araya, Niko Urho, Pia Kohler, Rita Lipson, Trista Patterson, and Seth Cook. Special thanks to Reggie Talbert for building up my strength and stamina. Annabell Waititu, Joe Ageyo, Philip Osano, and Wanjira Mathai offered insight and inspiration every time I was in Nairobi since 2001, and have become part of my family there. Joe Ageyo and I began producing short films that became what some called the white papers on global environmental governance in images.<sup>4</sup> I am

grateful to Joe for locating and procuring the images in this book that bring the founding of UNEP in Nairobi to life.

Much of my work has developed alongside my teaching, and my students at Yale, the College of William & Mary, and UMass Boston have informed and inspired me. We explored history, pondered over performance, and imagined new institutional design scenarios. I am particularly grateful to Susanah Stoessel, who co-created with me the Environmental History Project, and preserved and analyzed precious archival material. The research team at the Center for Governance and Sustainability at UMass Boston helped me build a robust empirical baseline. Natalia Escobar-Pemberthy was the force behind the creation of the massive financial database of UNEP's resources. We now have a unique tool that allows us to track UNEP's finances since its creation. The research assistance from Anna Dubrova, Candace Famiglietti, James Whitacre, Andrew Fasullo, Gabriela Bueno Gibbs, Judit Senarriaga, Jungwoo Chun, and Michael Cole was critical in understanding UNEP and visualizing parts of its operations, but, most importantly, it spurred important conversations about the past, present, and potential of global environmental governance. We continue this work in new ways in collaboration with UNEP where, with the Law Division, we are working on the Environmental Conventions Index, which assesses the extent to which countries implement their obligations under the international environmental agreements. I am particularly grateful to the Honorable Vincent Biruta, former minister of environment (and currently minister of foreign affairs) of Rwanda, and to Juliet Kabera, director general of the Rwanda Environment Management Authority, both of whom have taken up the Index as the basis for pan-African collaboration on improving environmental performance.

Writing the untold story of the world's leading environmental institution is a challenging and rather risky task. There are many embedded beliefs about the United Nations and about UNEP and its place in the world. Unearthing these stories, checking them against the historical record and against the narratives of the historical figures present at creation, and displaying the different layers demanded a lot of empirical work and multiple tests of the narrative. There will likely be scholars,

staff, and politicians who take issue with some of the narrative despite my efforts at objectivity, integrity, and intellectual honesty. As this book is the first full-length study of UNEP, I hope it will invite more scholarship and more open debate. The engagement of Ambassador Macharia Kamau, the Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations, with the precursor analysis for this book strengthened the narrative as well as my conviction and passion for this subject. It also confirmed the political relevance of this inquiry and, opening a discussion in the United Nations, contributed to the opportunity to serve on the UN Scientific Advisory Board to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

My thanks go to Beth Clevenger for believing in this book and prompting me (multiple times!) to make it better, and to Sikina Jinnah and Simon Nicholson for their guidance and for launching the One Planet series with the goal of bringing science and policy into direct dialogue. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions improved my argument, and to John Matuszak, whose open review of the manuscript helped identify gaps and omissions and pushed it to the next level. This narrative has also been improved by expert editing throughout its various permutations. I thank Melissa Goodall, Ehsan Masood, and Pia Kohler for their careful reading and constructive suggestions, for engaging with the manuscript's substance and style. All mistakes, of course, remain mine.

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of UNEP, I look back at the twenty years during which I have engaged with the organization and realize that, to my family, this has seemed like a never-ending journey. I am deeply grateful to my parents, Rumiana Jeleva and Hristo Ivanov, for their support of my choices in life. The path I took seems inevitable in retrospect but was unprecedented and impossible to imagine at the start. Thank you for being there for me every step of the way! I wish I could be closer. My husband, Alexander Gritsinin, has been the staunchest supporter of my work and the source of intellectual inspiration. We met when I was just beginning the PhD program at Yale, and he saw me through the trials and tribulations of a dissertation and two new jobs. Thank you for always being on my side and for making me sing along with *Hamilton*, "I am not throwing away my shot!" Thanks also to our sons, Gleb and Aleksandr Gritsinin, for creating an amazing family that I am so grateful to be a part of.

This work builds on the efforts of so many people who created international institutions and labored tirelessly to ensure that they function well. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to meet the founders, the leaders, and the operatives of the global environmental governance system. Many of them have passed and, in these pages, I offer the story of their legacy. And I hope to inspire others who will continue it.

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