# The Rise of the Region in Global Environmental Politics

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In these muddled times for global environmental governance, there are many reasons to be attracted to regional approaches, whether the goal is institution building, norm diffusion, or social mobilization for change. In this essay I consider briefly four sources of attraction: that regions offer hope for political progress where global efforts have stalled; that regions offer superior conditions of scale for common property resource management; that regions are more conducive to promoting norm diffusion; and that regional developments may be a foundation for a cumulative approach to building global environmental governance.

## The Rise of the Regional as the Death of the Global?

Clearly, some of the pull of the regional is rooted in the failure of the global, or at least the stagnation of the current global moment. It has become clear that the engine of progress in international environmental governance has stalled, at least if progress is defined by the treaty-oriented grand strategy of liberal international environmentalism.[1]

One symptom is the rapidly declining rate of formation of new agreements or significant modification of existing agreements. Data from the International Environmental Agreements Database Project[2] draw a clear picture of recent trends (Table 1). These numbers reflect the stagnation and drift seen at present in international political dialogue on the environment. Progress—again, if agreements are progress—has been replaced by fewer and increasingly detailed negotiations on second-order considerations, in a context that lacks the broader political and economic framework needed for effectiveness.

Moreover, the problem is not simply a declining rate of agreement formation, which could indicate a lack of demand rooted in problems solved and effective institutions already in place. Much of the steam seems also to have gone out of several of the most important existing global regimes, with climate

1. Park, Conca, and Finger 2008.
2. International Environmental Agreements Database Project, available at http://iea.uoregon.edu/page.php?file=home.htm&query=static, viewed December 1, 2011.

*Global Environmental Politics* 12:3, August 2012
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**Table 1**
Recent Trends in International Environmental Agreements

| *Time Period* | *Total Number of Multilateral Agreements and Modifications* | *Agreements by Type* | | | *Total Number of Bilateral Agreements and Modifications* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *Multilateral Agreements* | *Multilateral Amendments* | *Multilateral Protocols* | |
| 1990–1994 | 187 | 97 | 62 | 28 | 204 |
| 1995–1999 | 155 | 55 | 63 | 37 | 264 |
| 2000–2004 | 136 | 52 | 60 | 24 | 60 |
| 2005–2011 | 75 | 17 | 48 | 10 | 15 |

change simply the most high-profile example. The Basel Convention, which regulates the North-to-South flow of hazardous waste, has been locked for more than fifteen years in contentious debate on whether to replace the regime's "prior informed consent" approach with the so-called Basel Ban favored by the European Union and many less developed countries.[3] Paralyzed by this split, Basel has plodded along with its working groups, conferences of the parties (COPs), and regional centers—sometimes stalling and sometimes, as in the 2011 COP, showing signs of progress in resolving issues internal to the regime. Meanwhile, a shifting global economy has given us the rise of a South-to-South hazardous waste trade, a burgeoning trade in e-waste, and what is generally agreed to be a large volume of illicit trafficking. As a result, most of the world's actual hazardous waste flows outside of the Basel regime's North-to-South regulatory framework entirely.[4]

With new agreement formation lagging and several important agreements seemingly stalled, it is perhaps not surprising that the momentum of global summitry has also faded. Regardless of the ultimate impact of the "Rio+20" Earth Summit, we can abandon the idea of progressive continuity across global environmental summits, even as we seem to be stuck with their ritualized repetition. With its focus on UN institutional reform and the global green economy, Rio+20 is as divorced from the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and its resource-centered "WEHAB" agenda (water, energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity) as that meeting was from the 1992 Earth Summit's push for issue-area regimes and a broader North-South bargain on sustainability.

Such drift from one fashion of the moment to another would be acceptable if it drifted into domains of potentially significant productivity. But as of this writing, governments head into the Rio+20 meeting with what is at best a muddled agenda and nothing close to a robust political consensus. The institutional-reform portion of Rio's agenda lacks a shared sense of the problem

3. Clapp 2010.
4. See, for example, the Indonesian-Swiss Country-led Initiative 2011.

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being solved. Is it poor coordination among diverse intergovernmental organizations with overlapping mandates? Is it that the environment has at best a weak seat at the tables that matter most, such as global trade negotiations? Is it treaty fatigue and the tendency of accords to outpace the institutional capacity of many countries to implement them? If confusion about the problem being solved has bred drift on institutional reform, a similar vagueness of purpose on the global green economy—Rio's other main agenda item—has bred suspicion. While some governments endorse the green-economy framework as a logical extension of the idea of sustainable development, many others see it as an abandonment of commitments made twenty years ago or as an excuse for new trade restrictions and aid conditionality.[5] Thus, regions attract increased attention from idea diffusers, institutional designers, and change agents in no small measure because of a profound sense of obstruction and drift at the global level.

## The Importance of Scale: A Collective-Action Case for the Regional

There is, however, a second and more compelling reason for the pull of the regional on our attention. It is rooted in one of the great insights of recent decades of environmental scholarship—that actors can, under admittedly stringent conditions, self-organize and maintain rule systems for sustainable use of common property resources.[6] Although this insight spawned some optimism that global treaty regimes could become such rule-based systems,[7] much of what we know about collective action tells us that such schemes face some exponentially greater challenges as they grow in scale. Transaction costs and information needs explode. Critical design elements such as face-to-face monitoring mechanisms—rich in information, low in transaction costs, and high in culturally embedded authority—are much more difficult to create and sustain at larger scales. A critical boundary condition—that there be a minimal degree of insulation from external shocks and rapid, non-incremental perturbations that overwhelm the capacity to adjust—also becomes harder to maintain as scale expands.[8] For these reasons, the possibility of arranging robust schemes for common property resources and public goods at supranational scale may seem more feasible at the regional level than the global.

Several of the cases in this issue point to these possibilities. Certainly, the conditions for synergies between democratic participation and policy effectiveness to which Klinke points in this issue are more readily organized—or at least sought—at the regional level than the global. And however difficult it may be to organize collective action for "environmental security" at the regional scale, as Matthew documents in South Asia, the challenges pale in comparison to the global collective action problem. These daunting barriers can be seen in recent UN Security Council open debates on climate change, which have run aground

5. Alsaidi 2010.
6. For a summary of this extensive literature see Dolšak and Ostrom 2003.
7. Keohane and Ostrom 1995.
8. Ostrom 1990.

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on questions ranging from organizational mandates to causal relations to conceptual frameworks for thinking about security.

Nevertheless, we should temper any relative enthusiasm for the regional scale with the recognition that it remains highly debatable whether regional or global has the better track record in practice. For every successful arrangement around a shared river basin, a fishery, or a regional sea, we find others that fail to get even preliminary traction. For every Baltic Sea of cooperation, there seems to be a South China Sea of contention; for every Indus Waters Treaty, there seems to be a Nile debacle. Much the same can be said at the global level, of course: for every Montreal, there is a Ramsar, and so on. Even if we can agree how to measure institutional effectiveness across scales, we must also ask some conceptual questions that at the moment lack obvious answers. Is the regional scale more like the local, with its (at least theoretical) potential for lower-cost monitoring and information systems, a manageable numbers of actors, the self-evident shadow of the future found in a shared neighborhood, and culturally embedded norms of proscription and responsibility? Or is it more like the global, where such conditions rarely obtain?

## From Collective Action to Norm Entrepreneurialism

If we shift from a collective-action framework to one stressing normative change, we find a third reason for the pull of the regional on our attention. Valuable though it is, a collective-action perspective may focus our attention too narrowly on the immediate set of contextual conditions necessary for effective agreement, as opposed to the larger political context that creates pressures on states to agree, or that catalyzes learning processes that yield a new understanding of interests. In recent decades some of the most dynamic and consequential modes of institution building have been stakeholder-oriented and network-based, and have been legitimized by social practices rather than legal codification or formal standing.[9] Seen in this light, the region appears not as a more manageable scale for collective action than the global, but rather as a distinct scale of social action with its own advantages and disadvantages.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the global enjoys certain distinct advantages for norm entrepreneurialism that many regions may lack. Among these advantages of the global are, in theory, a stronger community of mobilized civil-society organizations, better-defined institutional frameworks in which to press for change, and more vulnerable targets that face greater scrutiny in legitimizing themselves as neutral, expert, and progress-oriented. And the historical record may bear out this caution. Although we lack such an inventory, my sense is that there are more examples of global norm entrepreneurs catalyzing regional institutional change than vice versa. Dynamic developments at the regional level regarding water governance, for example, have clearly fed off of global pressures for change: the expert-community push for integrated water re-

9. Conca 2006.

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source management, activist campaigns against privatization and for a human right to water, and a changing World Bank view of the importance of regional cooperation when funding national development projects.

Historically at least, the reasons for a greater global-to-regional normative impetus than vice versa seem clear. It is no accident that activists targeted the World Bank, rather than its regional counterparts, in the quest to make development assistance greener and halt poorly conceived infrastructure projects. The Bank provided a far more accessible target and a better focal point for mobilizing broader coalitions—elements we know from social movement theory to be critical in galvanizing collective action, particularly outside the context of shared national cultures and traditions of political action. Broadly speaking, the particular repertoire used in the Bank case blended knowledge-based critiques that undercut the Bank's expert status, site-specific protests that undermined the moral legitimacy of its actions, and conventional lobbying pressures in the corridors of power in Washington, Bonn, and Tokyo. Simply put, this blended repertoire was easier to mobilize and execute on a global scale than regionally. Similarly, and more recently, it is no accident that anti-dam activism has congealed into a distinctly global form of contentious politics, even though the vast majority of the world's dams are being built in a single region of the world (Asia).

However, the dynamic development of global norm entrepreneurialism has itself changed the context, possibly in ways that push us toward the regional. The same asymmetries of power and voice seen in North-South interstate dynamics crop up in global activist networks; this problem may prove to be more manageable at a regional scale. Similarly, "going global" has often left activists vulnerable to a sovereign backlash (as seen, for example, in the antidams case). At their worst, these obstacles undercut the twin bases of the activist bid for authority: the claim to represent a compelling moral cause and a voiceless constituency. To the extent that these tensions are rooted in distancing—spatial, cross-cultural, and socio-economic—they may be more manageable at a regional scale. Moreover, as Lorraine Elliott's analysis of the ASEAN case (in this issue) suggests, entry points for nonstate actors tied to the legitimization struggles of political authority may exist in regional political organizations just as they do in global functional ones.

Regardless of how we tote up these advantages and disadvantages, the larger point is this: how we view regional and global possibilities depends not simply on bargaining dynamics among governments, but in no small part on the capacity—at any scale—to catalyze normative frameworks that give impetus to progressive institution building for sustainability.

## The Regional as a Cumulative and Catalytic Path to the Global

The discussion thus far has treated developments and possibilities at global and regional scales as involving distinct dynamics and discrete choices of political actors. To the extent that this is reasonable, my own sense is that, while norms of inter-sovereign cooperation make the region seem a more politically tractable

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scale for collective action, leveraging the contentious politics of neoliberalism and its discontents works better on a global stage. But it may not make sense to decouple the two levels. This brings us to a fourth reason for the pull of the regional: potential for cross-level synergies and, in particular, the possibility of the regional as a cumulative pathway to the global. One element of this path is pointed out in Selin's analysis of regional centers that support more effective global cooperation, in this case in the chemicals conventions. My own research domain of water provides an interesting example of a somewhat different pathway. At the global level, longstanding efforts to create a framework convention on shared river basins have largely stalled, given the reluctance of all but a handful of governments to ratify the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention.[10] While there are many barriers to launching this regime, the heart of the problem has involved polarization between the treaty's two core principles: equitable use of water resources (in general, favored by upstream states) and avoiding significant harm to other riparian states (in general, the downstream position). Yet, realistically, all that a global framework convention can do is put such principles into play in negotiations on individual river basins. Finding a way to balance these principles can occur only if we succeed in getting several robust basin-scale regimes that make it work locally, so that actors from other basins can learn and adapt accordingly.[11] There are clear linkages here to Balsiger's analysis of the Alps case, in terms of multiple overlapping functional spaces and the rearticulation of territoriality.

## The Global as a Moment in Time?

In considering all of this, we should be attuned to a final possibility: that global environmental governance appeared as a relatively fleeting moment of opportunity, riding on a resurgent wave of economic and civic globalization that is now largely spent. The period from Rio 1992 until the 'Battle in Seattle' (and Prague, and Genoa, and . . .) may have been the high water mark of possibility for global reform, simply because the world had become just globalized enough. Although globalization is often indicted for the environmental controversies and challenges it has created, the sense of possibility for global correctives also rode the globalization wave—feeding on revolutions in global communications and personal mobility, the integration of global media, the emergence of a transnationalized environmental science, and the interactive linking of newly democratic spaces in the wake of the Cold War. Perhaps the globalized complexity of the world political economy had become just great enough to drive actors toward ambitious new bids for standing as global stakeholders, but not yet so great as to make actual global responses to those claims impossible. Today, with the Euro on the brink, the hegemonic reach of the United States undercut by external entanglements and internal cleavages, and emerging economies such as

10. Salman 2007.
11. Conca, Wu, and Mei 2006.

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China, India, and Brazil increasingly vulnerable to the sluggish world economy, that global window of possibility may have closed.

If this proves to be the case, then a closing window of the global should push us to open windows on the regional from a sense of ethics. As the mitigation agenda has stalled on a range of key issues, the adaptation agenda becomes more urgent, particularly for the world's poorest and most vulnerable peoples. Whether the issue is climate change, the loss of biodiversity, the spread of land degradation, water scarcity, or the continued strip-mining of coastal zone resources, regional approaches to adaptation have become increasingly important in human terms. Simply put, our failure to make global progress in preventing these problems in the twenty years since Rio means we have an added moral responsibility to attend to their consequences in the next twenty. If so, then we are all regionalists now.

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