

Introduction

Steven Bernstein, Matthew Hoffmann, and Erika Weinthal

We kick off Issue 20-2 with a forum by Kate Neville on the complications of diverting fossil fuel finance. Over the last decade, climate activists have pushed for institutions to shift their investments away from the fossil fuel sector. At a time when international action on climate change has come to a halt, owing not only to the lack of US engagement but also to the COVID-19 pandemic, Neville provides an important account of the role of markets and the private sector in shaping environmental outcomes. She especially highlights their intersection with advocacy for divestments from fossil fuels. In doing so, Neville cautions proponents of fossil fuel divestment also to take into account the unintended social and environmental consequences that can result from reinvestment in other sectors, including in renewable energy technologies.

The COVID-19 pandemic is providing an opportunity, albeit from terrible circumstances, for the GEP community to reflect on the state of the global environment and broader issues of sustainability. While the articles in this issue were researched and written before the pandemic hit, the themes and insights that they explore—new ways to measure sustainability, the limits and opportunities of global institutions and cooperation around climate change and carbon pricing—are perhaps even more important as the world looks to recover from the pandemic and plan for recovery in a hopefully more sustainable fashion.

The first research article in this issue, by Doris Fuchs, Bernd Schlipphak, Oliver Treib, Le Anh Nguyen Long, and Markus Lederer, tackles ways to measure quality of life through a critical analysis of sustainability and wellbeing indicator sets. Starting with the premise that there is much disagreement about whether it is even possible to quantify a universal quality of life indicator, Fuchs and coauthors examine whether it matters if wellbeing is measured solely in economic terms or whether a broader measurement tool is needed that takes into account social, environmental, and political criteria. The authors offer a new approach that incorporates sustainability dimensions into a quality-of-life measurement. As they underscore, their findings should encourage us to reflect on understandings of well-being, sustainability, and quality of life as we engage in the study and practice of global environmental politics.

Two articles in this issue take a critical look at demands for major institutional reforms and strong global governance in response to planetary boundaries and crises. Michael Albert's critical examination of earth system governance

(ESG) argues that while many ESG advocates pay insufficient attention to the capitalist roots of planetary crises, critics fail to consider what a post-capitalist form of ESG might entail. He proposes an Ecological Marxist perspective to bridge this gap, which pays attention to both political-economy structural constraints on Earth system stability and strategies for democratization.

The next article examines the specific need for earth system governance of planetary geoengineering to address the climate crisis. Here, Ina Möller explores the existing tension between scientific problem definitions and institutional fit when it comes to geoengineering technologies. With a focus on both carbon dioxide removal technologies and solar radiation management technologies, Möller illuminates the multiplicity of challenges faced by policymakers in creating appropriate governance mechanisms.

The question of whether the Paris Agreement can succeed where past multilateral agreements have failed motivates a good deal of global climate politics research. Håkon Sælen provides a fascinating take on this question. He develops an agent-based simulation model to explore the conditions under which reciprocity dynamics among the parties are likely to develop into a ratcheting up of ambition sufficient to fulfill the Paris goals. The results of the simulation model suggest that ratcheting up is possible but only under a set of fairly restrictive conditions, pointing to the important role that extra-Paris dynamics will have to play in achieving global climate goals.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat is often assumed to play a key role in the ratcheting up of member states' ambitions that Sælen is modeling. However, the ways in which it can play this role have not been definitively explored. Barbara Saerbeck, Mareike Well, Helge Jörgens, Alexandra Goritz, and Nina Kolleck look to fill this lacuna, undertaking a social network analysis of the secretariat's interactions with major stakeholders in climate governance. This analysis of the secretariat's relationships along with interviews with stakeholders suggests it is becoming more proactive in its attempts to influence the direction of climate governance toward more ambition.

Anchoring the issue is Sebastian Levi, Christian Flachsland, and Michael Jakob's study of the social, economic, and political conditions that account for the wide variation in implementation of carbon pricing across states and sub-national jurisdictions. Their results suggest that along with political economy analyses, policy makers should pay more attention to public attitudes and regulatory capacities, which they find are the most important factors in explaining higher carbon prices.