

# Book Review

Ivanova, Maria. 2021. *The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution: UNEP at Fifty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Reviewed by Lucile Maertens  
University of Lausanne

On the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Maria Ivanova offers the first “biography of UNEP” (6). *The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution* traces the organization's inception back to the preparations for the 1972 Stockholm Conference and guides the reader through mandate evolutions and reform projects, including the reform process concluded at Rio+20 in 2012, which granted UNEP universal membership through the newly established UN Environment Assembly (UNEA). Ivanova assesses UNEP's successes, such as the reversal of the depletion of the ozone layer, which she describes as its “greatest achievement” (93), and its failures, including its director's disengagement from the lead-up process to the 1992 Rio Earth summit.

The author begins by challenging the institutional deficiency theory, which argues that UNEP was deliberately designed as a weak institution. She offers alternative lenses to study UNEP's performance and its limits as an anchor institution: capacity, connectivity, and credibility. Through the different chapters, she shows how politics, geography, and individuals shape these three dimensions, eventually affecting UNEP's authority: UNEP is “*in* authority in the environmental field” but not “*an* authority” (201, emphasis original). Its institutional design, mandate transformations, location, and leadership jointly contributed to the uneven outputs of an organization “created to be a catalyst in the environmental field” (92) with “a big vision and modest resources” (91) but whose “identity and place within the UN system ... remain in flux” (139).

Throughout the book, Ivanova shows a permanent tension between the political role induced by the coordination mission attributed to UNEP and the functionalist project, with UNEP being “pushed out of the political debate and forced to be more of a technical organization” (150). The political argument put forward by developing countries, and Kenya especially, to locate UNEP's headquarters in Nairobi faced the functional mandate and efficiency logic defended by developed countries. The political ambitions of some executive directors were curbed by guardians of the status quo. Yet power dynamics are not systematically addressed in the book. Intergovernmental negotiations and funding politics are acutely discussed, but states' authority over the organization's path is not fully analyzed. This omission leaves some questions

unanswered, such as the paradoxical four-time re-election of Mostafa Tolba as executive director, despite his “harsh diplomatic approach” through which “he often alienated the United States and its Western allies” (154).

The close attention paid to individuals is one of the strengths of this book. Building on the literature on the power of international organizations’ heads, Ivanova brings the “individual back into the study of the institution” (142) and traces each executive director’s background, leadership style, and influence on UNEP. Three important conclusions can be drawn: individual management methods have long-lasting effects on organizational culture, leadership shapes the organization’s ability to raise funding, and executive directors cannot easily disrupt an organization’s internal structure and management practices. UNEP staff’s opposition to reforms is highlighted, but the book does not thoroughly investigate UNEP personnel beyond its leadership. UNEP staff often appear as one entity. Further research should unpack the complexity of UNEP’s professional ecologies, drawing on anthropology and sociology of international organizations (IOs) that have investigated the daily practices of IO staff as well as interactions between different professional fields and their consequences on IO functioning.

The detailed analysis of UNEP’s location is another original and substantial contribution. Ivanova demonstrates in several ways that place matters. Not only does she present well-known arguments that the political gain of having the first UN entity’s headquarters located in the Global South was overshadowed by UNEP’s lack of capacity and connectivity, but she also examines the organization’s impact on Kenya. The analysis supplements existing work by arguing that UNEP’s location explains its “greater operational engagement” (119) while breaking its promise to automatically provide “greater input from developing countries” (120) with fewer member states having permanent missions in Nairobi. Future research should explore the effect of the mainstreaming of digital working habits during the COVID-19 pandemic on UNEP’s connectivity.

Targeting a plural audience including academics, students, practitioners and diplomats, the book covers UNEP’s story in great detail, yet it tends to isolate UNEP from other actors, especially civil society and the private sector. It ignores the role of private actors in the preparation process for the Stockholm Conference, for instance, and barely addresses expert networks and nongovernmental organizations. Other UN entities are also only marginally considered. Such a focus on UNEP might result from the sources Ivanova used to conduct her study: UN documents (archives, resolutions, reports, etc.) and interviews, mostly with governmental officials and UNEP’s leaders and staff. Despite the impressive number of primary sources, methodology is not treated as rigorously as it might have been. Interviewing techniques, interviewee selection, and methods used to analyze interview transcripts are not discussed, nor is the ambivalent position of the author, who has been at times involved in UNEP’s activities. Such silence weakens the demonstration and scope of the framework, which could otherwise be applied to other IOs.

This remarkable book is part of the One Planet series, which invites authors “to produce a different kind of scholarship” (ix). Ivanova’s take on UNEP is comprehensive and refreshing: while highlighting the organization’s limits, it praises its perseverance and concludes with a list of pragmatic recommendations to “deliver on UNEP’s potential” (211) and help UNEP “serve as a champion of the earth” (233).