

Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer (eds): A world environmental organization: solutions or threat for effective international environmental governance?

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Is a World Environmental Organization (WEO) good for the health of the environment? This is, in a nutshell, the intriguing point that Biermann and Bauer's book raises. The subject is not new among global environmental politics scholars: it dates back at least to the early 70s and the time of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment. But it is not the originality of its theme that makes the book useful both for scholars involved in global environmental governance and for practitioners interested in its intellectual dimensions. Rather, its major strength is that it makes the cases for both sides of the debate on the role and potential of a WEO available in a single volume, as the authors clearly state in the Introduction.

The book is divided into three parts. After the editors' succinct and yet complete overview of the scholarly debate on the evolution of global environmental governance, the first part sets out the institutional background. In Chapter 2 Lorraine Elliot describes the United Nations' role in shaping intergovernmental environmental politics, especially since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, which in fact determined the creation of several new global environmental governance structures and treaties. In the ensuing Chapter Joyeeta Gupta focuses on global environmental governance from a South of the world perspective. She maintains that developing countries must closely cooperate if they are to negotiate effectively in the international environmental arena, irrespectively of emerging governance models: otherwise, every proposed reform will ultimately impair their interests.

The second part of the book, which consists of three chapters, puts forward the case for a WEO. In Chapter 4 Steve Charnovitz backs the establishment of a WEO,

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arguing that it should be inspired by the World Trade Organization (WTO) if it is to compete effectively with other institutions of global governance. At the same time, he points out the possible difficulties of a global approach to environmental governance in terms of subsidiarity in decision-making, pursuit of truly sustainable development practices, and organizational feasibility. Frank Biermann's chapter advances the idea of upgrading the UNEP to a WEO financially and politically independent from the UN. This would enhance the coordination of international environmental governance, improve the effectiveness of environmental policies in developing countries, and facilitate negotiations. The author then discusses some relevant characteristics of a WEO: its geographical reach, the relation with sustainable development, the recognition of the peculiarity of developing countries, the role of civil society. John Kirton, in Chapter 6, claims that the global environment would be better served by a WEO outside the UN bureaucracy and modelled on the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) of the NAFTA. In his normative framework, the richest countries, the Group of 8, should learn from their experience at regional level and take the lead in improving global environmental governance by deploying their capacities and responsibilities.

The three chapters in the third section of the book put forward different arguments against the creation of a WEO. Konrad von Moltke, in Chapter 7, claims that environmental issues are far too different from one another for a single WEO to deal with them successfully. In order to reduce overlaps and fragmentation in global environmental governance, he instead envisions the clustering of existing international environmental agreements and mechanisms in macro-areas: conservation issues, atmosphere, hazardous substances, marine environment, extractive resources, regional topics. Sebastian Oberthür and Thomas Gehring make their case against a WEO from an institutionalist perspective. The political and financial efforts required by the establishment of a WEO would have a number of side-effects and no clear benefits. In fact, without a substantial, and yet improbable, modification of decision-making processes it would very likely produce only the drawbacks of large bureaucratic organizations. In Chapter 8 Adil Najam stresses the pointlessness of "organizational tinkering" to confront the crisis of global environmental politics. It would be preferable to strengthen the UNEP: a WEO is in fact not feasible for the time being. Finally, in the concluding chapter, the editors sum up the cases for and against a WEO. They consider the main arguments of the book, trying to find a balance that would pave the way to better global environmental governance, and they single out some areas for further research.

Among the many issues raised in the book, some are recursive and emerge both from authors who favour and those who reject the creation of a WEO. These cross-cutting themes include at least the centrality of the UNEP, which remains the basis of world environmental regime-making, the difficult relationship between real-world effective international environmental governance and the principle of sustainable development, and the awareness that any international environmental regime, be it a WEO or a less ambitious structure, should at the same time deal with the political and the bureaucratic sides of governance processes.

By contrast, other topics, such as the North–South perspective and the institutional dimension, briefly surface here and there, notwithstanding their all-important role in the debate on global environmental governance. The North and the South have different responsibilities and capabilities vis-à-vis the global environment that any potential world environmental regime must acknowledge if it is to succeed.

Albeit controversially (see the positions of Gupta and Kirton for instance), their instances are confronted, sometimes implicitly, in almost all the chapters. However, a point that the volume somehow misses is the ethical dimension of the North–South argument. In fact, ethical considerations imply greater legitimacy and can persuade parties with conflicting interests to cooperate more closely on collective actions for the global environment: the more that international environmental governance is informed by principles of justice, the more a globally manageable solution can in principle be achieved. As regards the institutional dimension, a particularly hot topic in international environmental politics, the book only presents, in Oberthür and Gehring's chapter, its dark side, so to speak. However, institutions have facilitated research on, and policy response to, many international environmental problems, and ultimately they provide the rules of the game for more effective global environmental governance. Reflection on these points would probably have benefited the book.

After more than 30 years, the debate on the pros and cons of a WEO is still animated, for the subject is thorny and multi-layered, and in view of the ongoing state of affairs it is unsatisfactory. Biermann and Bauer's contribution to the debate is ultimately of great value because it offers a succinct and impartial state of the art map of international environmental governance, thereby filling a void in the literature. Both newcomers and experts can find means in the book to organize and systemize their comprehension of the challenges posed by the building of effective regimes of international environmental governance, as well as stimuli for further research. Other strengths of the book are the timeliness and comprehensiveness of the references of each chapter and the clarity of the index: these make the journey through the troubled waters of international environmental governance less tortuous.