

From Rio to Rio and Beyond: Innovation in Global Environmental Governance

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Liliana B. Andonova¹ and Matthew J. Hoffmann²

Abstract

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro unleashed new energy in environmental governance, engaging actors beyond the state and across scales, from local to global, from communities to large transnational networks. In this paper we argue that this expanded pluralism has contributed to a remarkable array of governance experimentation and innovations for the environment. The impact and legacy of Rio thus goes far beyond the formal agreements that emerged in 1992. We explore why Rio had this effect by examining the context within which Rio took place and the dynamics that it served to catalyze. We close by discussing the need to generate processes that lead to coordinated innovations. Such a reorganization of the global governance space could start a new legacy of collective wondering and multiple pathways to a greener future.

Keywords

Earth Summit, environmental governance, innovation and experimentation, private authority, public–private partnerships

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro unleashed new energy in environmental governance. Global environmental politics increasingly took a more pluralistic character, engaging actors beyond the state and across scales, from local to global, from communities to large transnational networks. This expanded pluralism, we argue, has

¹Graduate Institute (IHEID), Geneva, Switzerland

²University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Liliana B. Andonova, Graduate Institute (IHEID), Case postale 136-1211, Geneva 1211, Switzerland
Email: liliana.andonova@graduateinstitute.ch

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contributed to a remarkable array of governance experimentation and innovations for the environment. The impact and legacy of Rio thus goes far beyond the formal agreements that emerged in 1992 and is wrapped up in the ongoing transformation of global environmental governance evident across the spectrum of environmental challenges. We explore the relevance of issue complexity, private authority, and public–private collaborations as the underlying dynamics of recent trends in governance innovation. We also briefly speculate on how Rio+20 can foster up-scaling of experiments and synergies with overarching normative and regulatory regimes.

Pathways to Governing Complex Systems

The Rio conference was an expression, and perhaps the quintessential one, of the growing trend of large-scale multilateralism—global conferences and negotiations encompassing essentially all nation-states. Following a legacy of universal-membership international organizations and the rise of multilateral environmental treaties (e.g., The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, later treaties on Ozone Depletion), the Earth Summit ushered in an era where multilateralism was seen as *the* way to govern global problems. The Rio conference cemented this trend, institutionalizing the idea that regular global negotiations would be the world’s approach to key environmental problems (climate change, biodiversity loss, forests, desertification). It is ironic, but nonetheless true, that one somewhat unintended legacy of multilateralism has been to spur innovation and experimentation outside the formal, multilateral processes.

The substance of the discussions at the 1992 Earth Summit would prove transformative. By advancing the concept of “sustainable development” as its organizing principle, the Summit brought into sharp relief the complexity of the task of addressing environmental problems. It reflected the growing recognition that they are inextricably linked with other global issues such as development and trade. Scientific assessments that formed the foundation for negotiations reflected understanding of complex human-ecological systems making it obvious that challenges such as climate change or biodiversity loss were more than isolated “environmental problems” subject to the same kind of governance mechanisms that served the international community in dealing with transboundary pollution and even ozone depletion.

The complex nature of global environmental problems would serve to make multilateral cooperation challenging and simultaneously spur experimentation. The two intergovernmental conventions adopted in 1992 at Rio—the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are a case in point of how attempting to regulate issues of unenviable complexity enhanced the recognition of the multiscale nature of environmental challenges and catalyzed momentum behind innovation and experimentation. The breadth and depth of the undertaking embodied in the implementation efforts that followed the agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol of the UNFCCC, awoke a range of actors at multiple levels to the scale of the problems and the types of activities

that would be called on to implement global solutions. NGOs and corporations began to work on developing the infrastructure for carbon markets, transnational city networks emerged to prepare local governments for climate action, and community-based efforts for conservation and livelihoods proliferated. The multilateral process floundered in part because of the profound mismatch between a single, centralized, top-down global governance system and the inherently complex nature of environmental problems. The resulting uncertainty about fragmentation and appropriate scales of interventions has only been enhanced by processes of globalization and growing incentives and capacity of nonstate actors to engage in direct action for the environment.

Private Authority and Public–Private Partnerships

The conditions that made possible a flurry of multilevel, multiactor activity for the environment can also be traced to political dynamics that came to a head at Rio. The 1992 Earth Summit was one of the first major international meetings where what Rosenau (1990) has dubbed the multicentric world engaged with the state-centric world on a global stage. NGOs, local governments, corporations, and a host of civil society actors converged on Rio, sharing their experiences, urging action, networking, and considering their roles in the global governance of environmental problems. This widening of participation in global environmental governance emerged and was potent precisely because the conference reflected another trend in global governance, the pluralization of global authority. Since the 1990s, growing marketization of politics and society (key aspects of globalization) has gained significant momentum. These globalization dynamics coupled with the recognition of the multiscale nature of environmental problems altered a system that had state sovereignty as its foundation and resulted in a proliferation of actors that considered themselves to be authoritative agents undertaking actions for the environment.

The resulting infusion of nonstate actors in environmental politics opened new space in the global public domain for experimentation with new instruments that seek to influence behavior and environmental outcomes via markets, norms, and networks. The NGO-led Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification and the business-led ISO14001 certification are two well-documented schemes of regulation beyond the state. FSC certification gained ground rapidly since its creation in 1995, more than doubling after 2005 to 148 million hectares of forests, across 80 countries with more than 1,000 certificates issued (Forest Stewardship Council, 2011). The ISO14001 environmental management standard, which was inspired by efficiency and waste-minimization approaches advocated at Rio, similarly diffused rapidly from 13,994 certificates in 1999 to 223,149 in 2009. These prominent examples are just the tip of a multitude of nonstate initiatives undertaken by networks of advocacy or business actors, which have proliferated across multiple domains such as carbon markets, voluntary emission reductions, conservation, sustainable production, or chemical safety.

We do not suggest, however, that private authority has sidelined or substituted for public and intergovernmental institutions in environmental governance. On the contrary, intergovernmental frameworks such as the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol and the CBD provide the normative foundation and often specific incentives for nonstate actors as well as substate public authorities such as cities, regions, and communities to engage in direct environmental action. International organizations and units of national governments have furthermore actively facilitated the opening of the multilateral system to an array of public–private interventions for the environment. Public–private partnerships have diffused across the globe taking a variety of forms. Thousands of community-based partnerships for biodiversity management, energy efficiency, transportation, or agriculture coexist with large global partnerships platforms for corporate social responsibility, renewable energy diffusion, or resource management. International organizations and regimes are slowly starting to come to grips with the flurry of decentralized governance innovations and to evaluate their implications for advancing environmental objectives.

Rio+20 and beyond

The upcoming Earth Summit Rio+20 attempts to integrate under its two main themes, *The Green Economy* and *Environmental Governance*, new mechanisms of governance such as payments of ecoservices, markets, or community action and more traditional intergovernmental institutions and normative structures. Would these efforts succeed in steering humanity toward a stronger path of environmental stewardship? The proliferation of governance experimentation and innovation has raised questions about further fragmentation of global environmental governance, diversion of focus away from hard regulatory mechanisms, uneven geographies of innovation, and potential capture of governance processes by unelected actors and organizations. The Rio+20 Summit can make important headways toward fostering greater synergy between intergovernmental conventions and successful transitional innovations.

While much of the legacy of the 1992 Rio Summit arose from unintended consequences and reaction to problems in multilateral cooperation, a better outcome would be to generate processes consciously that lead to coordinated innovations. International environmental regimes can establish platforms to promote broader accountability and integration of private and hybrid governance solutions that are up to the task, and facilitate their up-scaling and more equitable distribution. Such interplay between multilateral and transnational action can give rise to multipronged, sector-based approaches to addressing complex global issues. Cooperation can be coordinated around issue clusters with compatible structures, whereby international institutions and rules can serve as anchors eliciting action by multiple constituencies. Such reorganization of the global governance space will not provide a magic bullet to collective problem solving. It could start a new legacy of collective wondering and multiple pathways to a greener future.

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Bios

Liliana B. Andonova is a Professor of Political Science and Deputy Director of the Center for International Environmental Studies at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva; and 2011-12 Giorgio Ruffolo Fellow in Sustainability Science at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Her research focuses on global environmental governance, public-private partnerships, international organizations, climate change, and European integration.

Matthew J. Hoffmann is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto. His research interests include global governance, climate politics, and international relations theory. He is the author of **Climate Governance at the Crossroads: Experimenting with a Global Response after Kyoto** from Oxford University Press (2011).