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Key Actors in UN Environmental Governance: Influence, Reform and Leadership

Steinar Andresen

Fridtjof Nansen Institute (FNI), P.O. Box 326, N-1326 Lysaker, Norway
Phone: +47 67111900 Fax: +47 67111910 E-mail: Steinar.Andresen@fni.no

Abstract: In the introductory article it was concluded that the effectiveness of the UN environmental institutions studied was quite low. Key actors, especially the U.S. and the EU, play a considerable role in explaining the course of development in these institutions. However, this does not mean that these processes are mainly state-driven as a number of other factors matter. The potential for reform and increased effectiveness is limited as the main actors, the U.S. the EU and G-77/China have very different interests and perceptions as to the future directions of these institutions.

Keywords: UN environment, institutions, the U.S. the EU, China, Norway

Abbreviations: CSD – Commission for Sustainable Development; EMG – Environmental Management Group; GMEF – Global Ministerial Environment Forum, JUSCANZ – Japan, U.S., Canada, New Zealand (other states have later become affiliated); MEAs – Multilateral Environmental Agreements; ODA – Official Development Assistance; SEPA – State Environmental Protection Administration; UNCED – United Nations Convention on Environment and Development; UNFCCC – United Nations Framework Commission on Climate Change; UNEO – United Nations Environmental Organization; UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme; WCSD – World Commission on Sustainable Development; WEO – World Environment Organization; WSSD – World Summit on Sustainable Development.

1. Introduction

The first article of this special issue concluded that the effectiveness of the UN institutions studied was generally quite low. Low effectiveness characterised the performance of the CSD. The three global conferences on the environment and development (1972, 1992, 2002) did make important initial contributions to agenda-setting and institution-building, but their

significance has been reduced over time. As to UNEP, the main focus was on its role as a coordinator; and here we concluded that UNEP had not been very effective. On the other hand, UNEP has been quite successful in its catalytic function, defined as establishing new multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).

This brief concluding contribution is intended primarily as a summary and discussion of the role and influence of the actors studied in connection with these UN institutions: the USA, the EU, China and Norway. As the two first actors have been most important, the focus is mainly on them, whereas the role of China is discussed mostly within the broader G-77 setting. We also draw on Ivanova's article on the establishment of UNEP.

We start with an account of these actors' positions and interests regarding the UN in general and UN environmental policy. Next, we look into their roles in these institutions and how have they been able to influence and shape developments. In the concluding section we sum up the influence of these key actors and also offer some other possible explanations. We discuss the status and prospect for reform and whether any of these actors may be able and willing to provide leadership in this process.

2. The UN and the Environment: Actor Position and Interests

2.1 'THE USA: RELUCTANT BUT INSTRUMENTAL'

As the world's sole remaining superpower, the USA has the greatest potential to promote its vision of the world through the UN. However, with its wide and varied power arsenal, the USA is also the actor with the least need of the UN. If the world organisation is seen as inefficient or a hindrance, "there is a natural desire of the US to maximise freedom of action abroad" (Chasek, 2007). The USA may decide to bypass multilateral institutions, and instead ensure its interests unilaterally or bilaterally. The extent to which it co-operates actively within the UN system depends upon whether the relevant body is seen as an effective vehicle for promoting US interests. Regarding environmental issues, "environmental policy has never been central to the US efforts to create international order" (Chasek, 2007). Washington may assume a leadership role if it considers that to be its interest – for example, within the ozone regime. However, in the absence of a strategic imperative, international environmental policy is more often determined by domestic or ideological considerations. There is no domestic consensus on the issue, but market mechanisms and consumer preferences are normally emphasised over international interventions, especially when the Republican Party is in power. Moreover, there is a fundamental suspicion towards international law and international norms. Given the deep-seated public scepticism to 'big government' in Washington and the propensity to deal with important environmental matters locally and at the state level, such scepticism towards the UN/international level is not surprising. The definition and perceptions of domestic interests is further complicated by the decentralised US decision-making system, both horizontally and vertically – alongside the importance of lobbying, whether from industry or from green NGOs. However, as the relevant UN institutions have only modest direct impact on the ground, conflict intensity is less pronounced in connection with these institutions compared for example with the climate issue.

2.2 'THE EU: HIGH AMBITIONS AND POSITIVE ATTITUDES'

The EU is not an actor in the UN system in the same strict sense as the nation-state actors. However, the EU has increasingly stood forth as such, and for the sake of simplicity we

consider it to be an actor here. At first glance, the EU would seem diametrically opposed to the USA with regard to both the UN and the environment. The EU is an environmental pusher, not least due to the leadership vacuum created by the more reluctant US position. The EU considers the vision of sustainability and multilateralism as a part of its emerging identity. In a 2003 communication, the Commission implicitly attempted to establish a contrasting identity to that of the United States (Vogler & Hannes, 2007). Such language and aspirations may be dismissed as typical EU (Commission) rhetoric; indeed, the EU has often scored higher on ambitions and visions than on action and practical implementation.

As the UN institutions in question here are ‘soft’ ones with no direct domestic implementation demands, they may serve as excellent arenas for the EU to push for environmental multilateralism through more forceful UN institutions. On the other hand, the EU has an even more complicated decision-making process than that of the federal USA, due to its institutional complexity and the marked differences among member states as to how ‘green’ they are. This creates significant challenges to unity, co-ordination and negotiation flexibility.

2.3 ‘CHINA: POSITIVE BUT CAUTIOUS’

The scope and depth of China’s international engagement have expanded in line with its importance, and the country has become increasingly keen to make itself known as a responsible actor. This in turn has meant that the UN has come to play a more important role for China. Still, China stands forth as a rather cautious actor, guarding its national sovereignty and rejecting international infringement. For a long time, the environment was a neglected issue, while continued strong economic growth was giving rise to serious environmental problems. More recently, Beijing has accorded greater priority to domestic environmental problems, but international environmental problems still do not rank high on the decision-making agenda. In line with other G-77 states, China highlights the overriding goals of development and poverty eradication. Beijing’s decision-makers perceive they have little influence on these institutions, in part because of the lack of priority given to such matters. They are more preoccupied with how they can benefit from these institutions. Still, thanks to its political and economic clout, China is among the most influential G-77 members. Chinese environmental decision-making is generally characterised by severe problems of co-ordination, both horizontally and vertically (Heggelund et al., 2005). However, in terms of UN environmental policy, it seems to be playing a rather smooth game, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and SEPA, the responsible environmental authority, in the leading roles.

2.4 ‘NORWAY: HIGH AMBITIONS AND STRONG SUPPORT’

Ever since it was established, the UN has been a cornerstone of Norwegian foreign policy – and the first UN Secretary-General came from Norway. On a recent poll, the non-EU member Norway ranked highest in “trust in the UN in Europe”, which sheds some sobering light on the EU ethos on the UN presented above. As Norway is a small (albeit wealthy) state with ‘activist’ ambitions in a range of issues, multilateralism and the UN are bound to be key components of its foreign policy. There are obvious elements of self-interest associated with the Norwegian role, but there may also be a larger ‘vision’ in seeking to transform institutional models from the national to the international level (Rosendal, 2007). Norway gives very high priority to environmental issues, aiming to stand out as a pusher and a leader, not least in the UN. This was strengthened by the fact that the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro

Harlem Brundtland headed the World Commission on Sustainable Development – which became known as the “Brundtland Commission”. There is also firm domestic consensus on UN environmental policy Norway’s decision-making apparatus is comparatively well coordinated, and is firmly in the hands of two government ministries: the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a non-EU state, Norway has the potential to serve as bridge-builder across the ‘trans-Atlantic divide’; moreover, as one of the few states to give well above 0.7% of its gross national income in ODA to developing countries, it enjoys high credibility in the South.

2.5 ‘STRONGLY VARIED ROLES AND INTERESTS’

The USA has the greatest potential to shape the direction of these institutions, but will do so only if that is perceived to be in line with its national interests. Washington does not have an overall ‘vision’ of UN environmental policy in the same manner as it does regarding the higher-priority issues of security and trade. China is the actor that comes closest to the USA. Both are fairly positive to the UN, but grant only modest priority to international environmental matters, while cautiously protecting their own national sovereignty. At the other end of the continuum are the EU and Norway, more visionary and giving higher priority both to the UN and environmental matters.

How do these general actor characteristics explain their role and influence on the shape and direction of the UN institutions in question? We start by examining the global conferences and the CSD through the transformation in discourse from environment to sustainable development.

3. The Role of Key Actors in Shaping the Agenda from Environment to Sustainable Development

3.1 ‘FROM STOCKHOLM TO RIO’

The 1972 Stockholm Conference was successful in elevating the environment on the international political agenda. Its most important accomplishment in terms of direct institution-building was the establishment of UNEP. At the time, the EU was not an actor on the international political scene, and China was a weak newcomer on the UN arena, having just replaced Taiwan in the Security Council. We have no specific information on the role played by Norway, but in all likelihood it served as ‘activist’ within the Nordic ‘mafia’, led by Sweden. However, there is little doubt as to who was by far *the* most important player in Stockholm. In the absence of the Soviet bloc, the USA was the only superpower; it was also the undisputed international environmental leader at the time. Washington’s influence in Stockholm is reflected by the fact that “The US was pleased with the outcome of the Conference and gained practically all of its objectives” (Chasek, 2007). As an emerging political force, the G-77/China had successfully lobbied in the UN General Assembly for a minimum of 1% of GNP in financial transfers from the North. Initially, the countries of the South had been reluctant to participate in this ‘environmental event’, seeing this as a way to prevent their own industrialisation. At the end of the day, however, they chose to take part. Links between the environment and development were about to be established (Ivanova, 2007). Washington objected strongly to bringing this into the Stockholm Conference. On this point, the USA was fairly successful, but it also realised – and correctly – that in the future it

might be impossible to discuss environmental protection with the South completely outside the context of development objectives.

The USA was also a dominant player at the Rio Summit, but its influence was reduced and it was more preoccupied with using its blocking power. Due not least to domestic circumstances, Washington played a defensive role. It emphasised its right to continued economic growth and no concessions on new and additional resources or transfer of technology on concessional terms. The USA was the only major actor not to sign the Biodiversity Convention. It also played a decisive role in watering down the UNFCCC commitments, its most direct mark on the Rio Process. On the other hand, the USA was unable to prevent the acceptance of the broader sustainable development discourse although it had firmly rejected the message that emerged from the WCSD.¹ The very ambitious Agenda 21 was also a far cry from Washington's ideas as to how these issues should be dealt with.

The EU played a more pro-active role, and UNCED witnessed the appearance of the Community as a full participant for the first time. The Commission played an active role in the making of Agenda 21: "the overall outcome (for the EC) was a success – not so much for sustainable development as for the reputation of the EU" (Vogler and Hannes, 2007). Success is seen relative to the performance of the USA – widely regarded as a diplomatic disaster. However, seen in relation to its own ambitions and expectations, EU influence was less impressive. Although the EU was now an actor in its own right, it was not always able to act as one. Many EU countries had the same objections to the process as the USA, but "they had learned to be attentive to international currents of opinion and to be ready to look for compromises to get an agreed result" (Brenton, 1994, p. 235). This highlights an important difference: the EU was able to tune in to the new tide of the time and behave 'politically correctly', in contrast to the blunt US approach of 'just say no'. While the USA stuck to the more traditional environmental issues, the EU was ready to accept the concept of sustainable development – at least in principle.

The Rio Summit marked the heyday of 'activism' and ambitiousness. As such it was perfect for an actor like Norway to play a leading role. Through the WCSD, Norway had taken on an ownership role to the concept of sustainable development. Norway had high credibility in the South; it championed greater NGO inclusion, and had played a key role in the planning process for the Rio Summit. The very notion of sustainable development – in contrast to the narrower traditional environmental UN pillar – had been effective in bringing in the South as more real participants in Rio (Najam, 2005). However, subsequent developments were to show how perceptions of this concept differed greatly. This was played out in the CSD in the 1990s.

3.2 'THE CSD: PLAYING THE BLAME GAME'

At Rio, the great majority of states agreed that a new institution bearing the name of 'sustainable development' was needed. However, frustrations soon mounted and the notion of the CSD as a 'talkshop' spread. To a large extent, the low effectiveness of the CSD reflects the North–South gap on what the nature of the CSD should be. To China/G-77 it should serve as a vehicle for facilitating and overseeing Agenda 21's ambitious promises of technology transfers and markedly increased ODA. As the CSD has not contributed much to increased efforts from the North, both China and the G-77 have become disillusioned with the North as well as with the CSD. They stress the ethical dimensions of fairness and equity, focusing on

¹ Interview with Gro Harlem Brundtland on Norwegian television, April 2007.

the absence of sustainable patterns of production and consumption in the North. In short, G-77/China has used the CSD as a platform from which to accuse the North for not following up Agenda 21. This has been done largely through general and rhetorical speeches by New York diplomats without much issue-specific knowledge of the issues at hand (Kaasa 2007). In this sense the South can be said to have been influential in setting the agenda in the CSD.

Both the EU and the USA disagreed with the ideological grandstanding pursued by the South, reflecting their differing perceptions of Agenda 21 and the CSD. Irrespective of the differences in discourse and diplomatic approach between the EU and the USA, in practice neither was ready to transfer huge amount of resources to the South or change their own affluent life-styles and economic growth paradigm for more sustainable alternatives. They were also generally more preoccupied with environmental issues than with development. Especially the USA wanted the CSD to be more of an informal 'think-tank' for probing new ideas for better implementation on the ground. To learn more about the state of the art, reporting was seen as important, as well as bringing in experts and stakeholders with detailed knowledge of the problems at hand. They thereby highlighted the responsibility also of the South in improving implementation, linked to the call for 'good governance' – not a popular concept in many Southern countries. The USA and the EU did not want to be the only ones to blame for the lack of progress in realising sustainable development. Norway was in a position to act as a broker, but the conflicts were too strong for it to have much impact. The next stage in the battle on the discourse and interpretation of sustainable development came with the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development.

3.3 'THE WSSD: THE USA IS CHIEF LAGGARD – ANY PUSHERS?'

The difference in the US position between Rio and Johannesburg has been summed up as 'obstructive passivity', as against 'principled opposition' (Vogler and Hannes, 2007). At this juncture, Washington was eager to underline that it supported sustainable development. Its interpretation of the broader agenda, however, was not in line with that of most other key actors. The USA accepted the significance of ODA, but linked it to 'good governance', which it saw as a prerequisite for development. The significance of Type II public-private partnerships was championed, as were greater business involvement and the use of market mechanisms for more effective implementation on the ground. Open trade was seen as most efficient for development, but it was the responsibility of each individual country to develop sound policies domestically. The USA was quite successful in pushing for Type II Partnerships and greater inclusion of business, but, as pointed out by Chasek (2007): "Most energy was used on ensuring that language antithetical to its goals did not appear in the documents".

While US negotiators had a clear mandate and pursued it with their usual political vigour, the EU again faced severe challenges. It was heavily committed to avoiding the expected lowest denominator outcome, but was again struggling with internal strife. Just as at Rio, powerful EU states and institutions had considerable sympathy for the US position, while others pushed for poverty reduction through institution-building and greater emphasis on sustainable development. These divides hampered the EU's ability to influence the course of events. In addition, it had to deal with Washington's 'vetoing approach' as well as a distrustful and disillusioned South. The result was that the EU concentrated on "defending the language and commitments of sustainable development accumulated over the past decade of global environmental governance" (Lightfoot and Burchell, 2004, p. 89) – in the same manner as it had secured necessary ratification of a greatly watered-down Kyoto Protocol (Hovi et al., 2003). As to the role of other actors, the broader and more poverty-focused agenda was clearly a victory for G-77/China, underlining their increasing influence on the agenda (Najam, 2005). On

the other hand, the practical significance of this remains to be seen. As to smaller actors like Norway (as pointed out by Rosendal, 2007), they did score a few points, but on the whole their influence was modest compared to Rio. Although the issue of large-scale reform of the UN was stonewalled at the Johannesburg Summit, agreement was reached on reform of the CSD.

3.4 'CSD REVISITED – REFORM WITH LIMITATIONS'

Both the EU and the USA wanted to bring in technical experts, civil society and industry groups to improve review and implementation as well as to reduce the influence of generalist diplomats. Both the USA and the EU claim a leadership role for introducing the review sessions (Chasek, 2007; Vogler & Hannes, 2007). More importantly, when these two key actors join forces they are able to bring about real changes. Norway had the Chairmanship in this transitional period and was thereby instrumental in bringing the reform about. The first review session in 2004 was widely acclaimed for meeting the goals of a more low-key practical approach. However, this proved to be only a half-way victory with limited lasting effects.

When the representatives met for regular negotiation sessions at the last CSD 15 in New York in May 2007, it was back to 'business as usual' with detailed negotiations and a continuation of the 'blame game'. The South reiterated its complaints over the lack of progress in realising Agenda 21 and related instruments. The 'blame game' also played out within the North, and the Southern rift was wide open on key issues. Energy and climate change were among the issues negotiated at CSD 15. The EU pushed for reference to the post-Kyoto regime, which was heavily opposed by the USA, the G-77 and other key actors as well. The EU also pushed for their favourite approach, targets and timetables – this time regarding energy efficiency – and encountered firm opposition from the USA, key JUSCANZ and G-77 states. The result was stalemate. The EU and Switzerland rejected the final compromise text presented by the Chair, on the grounds that it did not "meet world expectations or add value" (Earth Negotiations Bulletin 5(254), 2007, p. 2). Thus, "CSD-15 proved to be a sobering reminder that fundamental disagreements exist between states on the nature, scope and ambition of the sustainable development agenda (...) and the role, relevance and value of the CSD itself" (Ibid.).

4. UNEP and UN Reform: The Role of Key Actors

It has often been said that UNEP was deliberately crafted so as to be a weak institution. However, Ivanova's detailed account (2007) of the relevant primary material shows that this may not be the case. For example, UNEP's Nairobi location was the result of voting in the General Assembly, and on this point the majority – the South – was behind the decision. The fact that UNEP was set up as programme and not as a special agency was not deliberately done to make it weak. The mechanisms behind these decisions were far more complex. We can never know for sure whether key actors, like the USA, always say what they really mean, but the Secretary-General of the 1972 Conference, Canada's Maurice Strong, also supported the establishment of UNEP as a programme. With the benefit of hindsight we know that these factors have turned UNEP into a weak organisation, but the documentation presented by Ivanova indicates that this was not the intention of the founding fathers.

The USA played a key role in the establishment of UNEP; the Environmental Fund was also championed by the USA. Over time, the USA has had a significant influence on UNEP. For example, "as an unwritten 'iron rule' UNEPs deputy executive director from 1973–1998 was an American; so was the secretary of the UNEP Governing Council and the

chief of personnel” (Chasek, 2007). Relations between the USA and UNEP have varied over time, in part as a result of domestic US policies, in part as a result of the performance of UNEP. Initially the USA was a strong supporter of UNEP, becoming the largest contributor to the Environmental Fund. This changed when Ronald Reagan took office and he reduced political as well as financial support. Washington also disagreed with the broadened scope of UNEP and what was seen as a lack of coherent strategy in the period leading up to Rio. The USA and the EU viewed this development through different lenses. While the former saw it as a result of the expansive leadership style by Executive Director Mustafa Tolba, the EU perceived that UNEP was overburdened with the growing number of demands placed on it (Vogler & Hannes, 2007).

There was broad consensus, however, that the period between Rio 1992 and UNGASS 1997 was ‘the dark hour’ of UNEP, and both the USA and key EU countries demanded institutional reform. The dramatic withdrawal of US support for UNEP in the mid-1990s was a criticism of the lack of leadership and effectiveness (Ivanova, 2005). By the late 1990s, reforms were gradually introduced and the USA restored some of its funding. Since then, Washington has given higher priority to UNEP and has developed a more coherent strategy through closer and direct co-operation with UNEP, focusing on its role in terms of projects and programmes, paying less attention to the Governing Council and the GMEF. Today, the USA enjoys good, close working relations with UNEP, and is seen as “one of UNEP’s staunchest supporters” (Chasek, 2007).

Reflecting their strong support for UNEP, the EU members contribute more than two-thirds of the Environmental Fund, providing a strong basis for influence. However, this represents only a small part of UNEP’s total budget, and it has decreased considerably in real terms. Restricted financing now comprises more than two-thirds of UNEP’s revenues, giving individual donors the possibility to dictate its priorities. Norway is also among the staunchest supporters of UNEP and has remained a considerable contributor to its financing. As a result of the criticism against earmarked funds, Norway, together with some EU countries, has agreed to allow UNEP greater space for manoeuvring by channelling funding through framework agreements (Rosendal, 2007). Norway has introduced significant new initiatives in UNEP, but it has not succeeded in some of its more ambitious goals, like establishing a UNEP Scientific Advisory Panel. However, Norway has successfully promoted other initiatives, like the Bali Plan of Action, and has also pushed for a greater role of UNEP in chemical management. This issue illustrates key differences in *approaches* to environmental challenges between Norway and the EU on the one hand, and the USA, some JUSCANZ states as well as key Southern actors like China on the other hand. Washington does not agree that UNEP should start negotiating a binding mercury convention, as it sees sound management of chemicals as essentially a domestic issue. It therefore supports a voluntary approach, and partnerships and bilateral agreements. In contrast, the EU and Norway agree that UNEP should launch negotiations over a convention. This was one of the contentious issues at the 24th session of the UNEP Governing Council, held in February 2007. The outcome was to establish a process to address issues related to mercury, including the establishment of an ad hoc open-ended working group. Both China and India supported the US voluntary approach, whereas other developing countries went for the EU approach. (Earth Negotiations Bulletin 16(60), 2007).

The question of UN environmental reform mirrors the various actors’ perceptions of UNEP as well as their differences in approach on how to deal effectively with environmental challenges and sustainable development. Again, the USA and other key JUSCANZ countries are pitted against the EU and small states like Norway, with the South split on the issue. Washington does not support efforts to turn UNEP into a UN agency, nor does it back the creation of a Global or UN Environmental Organisation. In other words, the ‘staunch’ US

support for the UNEP means support for the status quo – or perhaps an improved, more effective status quo within the existing framework. According to former Ambassador Sichan Siv, alternate US representative to the General Assembly: “The existing system of MEAs reflects a good balance of co-ordination and decentralization. We do not need any additional supranational authorities”.² It is the principal responsibility of national governments to improve co-ordination of environmental issues.

In line with the far more ‘visionary’ approach, key EU states and more recently also the EU itself have long wanted a strengthened and more unified UN environmental pillar. Initially they did not feel that UNEP would be able to realise that expectation, but this has changed over time. As early as in 1997 Germany was among the states that proposed a World Environmental Organisation. The proposal was premature: the EU opted for a more incremental approach by supporting the EMG as a first step and later the establishment of high-level ministerial forum (GMEF) alongside the Governing Council meetings. In the preparation for the WSSD the EU did not win through with its reform ambitions, but was satisfied that it was the only key actor attempting to drive the process forward as there was no serious alternative on the table (Vogler & Hannes, 2007). More recently the EU, as a unified actor, has continued its incremental approach by proposing that UNEP be upgraded to a specialised agency (UNEO), with universal membership in the Governing Council. The EU sees this as a compromise proposal between a fully fledged WEO and a somewhat strengthened UNEP. Simplification and better co-ordination will be the result – according to the EU perspective. The upgraded institution would be located in Nairobi.

At the Paris Conference for Global Ecological Governance in February 2007, forty-six states – across the North–South divide – supported the establishment of a UNEO along the EU model. The question of UN reform also played a central role at the 24th Governing Council of UNEP (2007). However, there has not been much development. The EU and some other states have continued to push, but key actors remain reluctant. The USA still sees no need for better and more co-ordination, and many states in the South fear that a stronger environmental pillar will weaken the development agenda. The views of China are interesting. Beijing has very good relations with UNEP, which has been instrumental in assisting in terms of policy formulation, technical assistance, personnel training as well as awareness rising. However, China is less positive to the role played by UNEP internationally and does not feel that a UNEO will necessarily rectify UNEP’s problems (Heggelund & Backer, 2007). This view was confirmed at the last GC meeting where China “urged the involvement of other international organisations in the context of UN reform” (Earth Negotiations Bulletin 16(60), 2007, p. 15). Many G-77 states are also negative to the co-ordinating role of UNEP as it is today. Still, it was agreed that UNEP should be strengthened: “The problems lies in how to achieve this, by bolstering the existing structure, or by transforming it into a new institution altogether” (Ibid., p. 19).

5. Concluding Comments: Influence, Reform and Leadership

What influence have these actors had for the development of these institutions and what other factors have made a difference? Both the USA and the EU have had significant influence on the shape and direction of these institutions. Still, this has by no means been solely a state-driven process. When the process was initiated, the USA played a key role in shaping the

² Chasek (this issue), includes a quote of Ambassador Sichan Siv from a 2005 speech before the 60th session of the UN General Assembly.

direction of the Stockholm Conference as well as in establishing UNEP. However, individual leadership on the part of Swedish individuals as well as Maurice Strong also made a significant difference. Contextual factors were important as well. The Stockholm Conference was the first of its kind: there were no competing institutions in place, and domestic constituencies, at least in the Western world, were ripe for environmental action.

The broadening of agenda from the environment to sustainable development has been a more complex process and one even less driven by states, as sustainable development was the takeaway message from the Brundtland Commission. It was endorsed in Rio, although the USA did not support this development. Smaller activist states like Norway, the green NGO community as well as key individuals have been instrumental in bringing about this development. The further broadening of the agenda in Johannesburg, including the third social dimension of poverty, can be seen as a 'discourse victory' for G-77/China – with unknown effects. The USA has become increasingly alienated in this process, but has certainly been able to influence it at critical junctures where its national interests are involved. The influence of the EU has been reduced through internal strife, but unlike the USA it has been able and willing to tune in to the sentiment of the day, and has also used considerable energy to counter US proposals. That the Johannesburg WSSD was less successful than the Rio Summit is no doubt in part due to Washington's perceived laggard role as well as the lack of leadership on the part of others. However, other factors should not be overlooked, and different contextual factors play a large role. Widespread optimism in the wake of the end of the Cold War and deep environmental concern in the general public characterised the early 1990s. In contrast, terrorism and fear was the name of the game by 2002, and soft issues like the environment and development did not rank high on the agenda. Moreover, good preparations and individual leadership characterised the management of the 1992 Conference. In contrast, insufficient planning, turf battles – not least between UNEP and the CSD – as well as a lack of leadership characterised the management of 2002 Conference. Also, the broadening of the agenda, which many deemed positive, may have reduced the significance of WSSD as development, trade and poverty issues were dealt with in other and more important forums. Agenda-setting and institution-building are the main functions of the global conferences – but what is most needed today is implementation, not agenda-setting. The future of these conferences, probably in some modified version, hinges on the extent to which the broader sustainability agenda can be fleshed out in a meaningful way.

Judging from the most recent experiences from the CSD, future developments look bleak due to the greatly differing perceptions of the concept, as regards both means and ends. These differences are the main explanatory factor for the failure of the CSD. However, other factors should also be noted. The low-level placement of the CSD in the UN bureaucracy causes serious problems of co-ordination, horizontally and vertically with other UN bodies. Overlaps in mandate and function have given rise to many turf battles with UNEP, reducing the effectiveness of both institutions. Also, the lack of continuity in CSD leadership as well as duplication from other and more important institutions tends to diminish its effectiveness. Disregarding these and other factors, our assumption is that any institutional mending of the CSD would have only a moderately positive effect – considering the stalemate on sustainable development. When the EU and the USA join forces, reform is possible – but, as CSD 15 demonstrated, success may be short-lived. If the CSD is allowed to continue on this course, its main function is to give ammunition to opponents of the UN and of multilateralism more generally.

The widely differing approaches or belief systems among key actors, also reflecting differences in underlying interests, are replicated in discussions on the role of UNEP and the questions of UN reform. These differences have served to reduce the effectiveness of UNEP. This being said, UNEP as an institution in its own right has also contributed to low score in

effectiveness through weak leadership, bureaucratic procedures, top–down approach in terms of co-ordination of MEAs as well as internal organisational deficiencies (Andresen & Rosendal, 2007). The location as well as a weak financial structure has reinforced these weaknesses. This being said, there can be no doubt that UNEP has done much useful work – not the least on the ground, as the case study on China clearly shows. Over the past decade there have also been some positive developments in UNEP, due to stronger internal leadership as well as to greater support from key actors. However, there is still no agreement or progress on the future role of UNEP, and thereby UN reform.

Interestingly, the authors on the articles on the EU and the USA in this volume claim that both aspire for leadership roles. Intuitively, from a Western academic perspective, the EU's call for leadership seems more credible, with its demands for stronger and more binding institutions, higher ambitions, and target and timetable approaches, particularly regarding the environment. Washington rejects these 'top–down' institutional approaches, arguing for a 'bottom–up' voluntary market-based approach. We cannot know which of these approaches would provide a better environment and more sustainable development. The EU institutional approach appeals to many academics, but thus far, little has come of the thirteen UN attempted reforms and institution building in this area over the past decade (Najam et al., 2006). Research has shown that UNEP is weak on co-ordination. We do not know whether giving it higher status will improve this – or the environment.

Evaluating these actors in a leadership perspective also leaves doubt as to whether either of them deserves the leadership label (Skodvin & Andresen, 2006). As there has been little or no progress on the key questions of direction or reform, neither actor can be termed an instrumental leader. The EU may seem to qualify as a directional leader in showing the way to deal with these issues. In a sense this might be true, but so far a key element is missing: followers. Norway and Europe may follow, but most key G-77 states as well as the USA and JUSCANZ countries do not share the EU's view on how to deal with these issues. Thus the EU may be a 'group leader' – but not a global leader. The three main negotiating groups – the USA and its allies, the EU and its allies, and the G-77/China – concentrate on pushing for their approaches and agendas. This explains why so little has been achieved in terms of reform with positive practical consequences and why there is scant potential for raising the effectiveness of the UN in global environmental governance as well as giving more meaning to the concept of sustainable development.

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