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## **New Alliances in Global Sustainability Governance:**

### ***International Environmental Bureaucracies and Non-State Actors***

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#### ***Abstract***

After a long period of academic neglect, scholars have recently devoted increasing attention to the role and function of international environmental bureaucracies. While a number of skeptics continue to doubt that the bureaucracies of international environmental bodies and multilateral environmental agreements have any significant impact beyond that of technical assistance and services to nation-states, a growing number of authors argue that they indeed have an autonomous influence (e.g. Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Bauer 2006; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009b; Trondal et al. 2010; Jinnah 2014; Soonhee, Shena, and Lambright 2014; Bauer and Ege 2016). These scholars have shown that international environmental bureaucracies put issues on the political agenda, produce and spread knowledge, stimulate scientific as well as public debates, facilitate intergovernmental negotiations, and help implement international norms and rules. However, despite the progress in the study of international environmental bureaucracies, the precise nature of their interaction with non-state actors has so far not been analyzed in much detail. For that reason, the present paper aims to bridge this gap in the state of research on international environmental bureaucracies and focuses on the *vertical* institutional interplay of intergovernmental treaty secretariats with different sub-groups of non-governmental organizations in global sustainability governance. In particular, the paper explores the interplay of three different intergovernmental treaty secretariats (climate, biodiversity, and desertification) with non-state actors. By this means, the paper seeks to broaden our knowledge on the questions of how, why, and with what consequences these actors work together.

***Keywords:*** *Global Sustainability Governance, International Bureaucracies, Non-State Actors*

## 1. Introduction

The past few years have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in the role and function of international bureaucracies. While a number of skeptics continue to doubt that the bureaucracies of international regimes and organizations have any significant impact beyond that of technical assistance and services to nation-states, an increasing number of authors argue that they indeed exert an autonomous influence in various domains of global affairs (e.g. Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Bauer 2006; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009b; Trondal et al. 2010; Jinnah 2014; Soonhee, Shena, and Lambright 2014; Bauer and Ege 2016). These scholars perceive international bureaucracies as distinct actors and contend that they have attained several important tasks in contemporary global policy-making.

The field of global environmental politics is of particular interest for analyzing the evolution of international bureaucracies. This domain has been characterized as “one of the institutionally most dynamic areas in world politics regarding the number of international institutions and actors that have emerged over the past three decades” (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009c: 9). Within this policy domain, scholars have conducted several case studies about the impacts of intergovernmental treaty secretariats on policy outcomes. While these studies have considerably enhanced our understanding of how international bureaucracies act and pursue certain policies in global environmental governance, only little explicit attention has been paid to the interaction between these international bureaucracies and the plethora of non-state actors which have joined nation-states in the global arena. Against this backdrop, our paper addresses this issue and presents three illustrative examples of the interactions between different intergovernmental treaty secretariats and non-state actors in the field of global sustainability governance.

The paper is structured as follows. In a first step, we review the growing recognition of international bureaucracies in the field of international relations theory. Then, we refer to existing conceptualizations for the study of the interplay between international bureaucracies and non-state actors. On that basis, we focus on three secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements and show how these intergovernmental treaty secretariats interact with non-state actors. Finally, we draw some conclusions and point to aspects that merit attention in future research.

## 2. The Growing Recognition of International Bureaucracies

Over many decades, international bureaucracies have been disregarded as a unit of analysis in international relations theory. They were neither perceived as actors in their own right nor were their inner workings considered to play an important part in global affairs. A major reason for this neglect in the scholarly literature is the predominance of state-centric approaches, i.e. the *(neo-)realist* as well as the *(neo-)liberal-institutionalist schools of thought*, in the post-1945 period (Trondal et al. 2010: 3). Adherents of neo-realist accounts regard nation-states as the only relevant actors in the international system and claim that international bureaucracies are utilized by powerful nation-states as tools to maximize their own interests (Mearsheimer 1994/5). Most neo-liberal institutionalist accounts too have ignored the role and function of international bureaucracies in world politics despite their focus on intergovernmental cooperation and institutions (Keohane and Martin 1995).

In the 1990s, different scholars concerned with global politics started to perceive international bureaucracies as actors which develop their own preferences and act according to them (e.g. Haas 1990; Finnemore 1993; Reinalda and Verbeek 1998; Barnett and Finnemore 1999). This novel research interest in international bureaucracies is inextricably linked to the emergence of the concept of global governance as well as the constructivist turn in the discipline of international relations (Bauer and Weinlich 2011: 253-254). Authors in this tradition assert that the classical schools of thought within international relations theory have largely overlooked the increasingly salient role and function of actors other than the nation-state in the global policy realm (Hewson and Sinclair 1999; Higgott, Underhill, and Bieler 2000; Kahler and Lake 2003; Grande and Pauly 2005; Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010). That view has most prominently been formulated by James Rosenau. He asserts that “states and governments should be posited not as first among equals, but simply as significant actors in a world marked by an increasing diffusion of authority and a corresponding diminution of hierarchy” (Rosenau 1999: 292). In other words, Rosenau maintains that the nation-state constitutes only one of several *spheres of authority* in world politics that have emerged over the past decades (Rosenau 1997; 1999; 2007).

Building on Rosenau’s insights, various scholars have proposed alternative concepts of authority that challenge the classical state-centric perspective on international politics (Cutler, Haufler, and Porter 1999; Hall and Biersteker 2002; Rittberger and Nettesheim 2008; Green 2014). These non-traditional accounts of authority differ in several ways, but they are all

based on the assumption that the old paradigm in the field of international relations, which locates authority exclusively with sovereign nation-states, can no longer be maintained in the current study of global affairs. Proponents of these approaches have identified several types of authority which are not exclusively tied to national governments, and hence seek to broaden “the concept of authority to include non-formal-legal foundations of legitimacy and non-violent means of enforcement” (Lake 2010: 596). Put differently, they criticize classical theories for their statist ontology and narrow focus on the activities carried out by nation-states. Thus, these scholars direct attention to the growing significance of other actors than central governments and emphasize the development of new “structures of global authority” (Finnemore 2014: 221).

In the context of this scholarly literature on alternative types and concepts of authority in world politics, a number of authors have also conceptualized international environmental bureaucracies as actors that pursue certain policies which cannot entirely be controlled by national governments (e.g. Bauer 2006; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009b; Jinnah 2014). These scholars argue that the secretariats of multilateral environmental treaties and the environmental departments of international organizations have adopted various policy-making tasks, and may therefore be regarded as authoritative actors which cannot fully be understood through simplistic principle-agent models (Bauer et al. 2009: 26-27). In fact, they have shown that international environmental bureaucracies put existing problems on the political agenda, produce and spread knowledge, stimulate scientific as well as public debates, facilitate intergovernmental negotiations, and help implement internationally agreed norms and rules (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009a: 319-327; Jinnah 2014: 179-186). Hence, according to these authors, international environmental bureaucracies matter and have attained different authoritative functions in world politics.

Despite the progress in the study of international bureaucracies, the question of how these international institutions interact with non-state actors has so far not been studied in much detail. For that reason, our paper seeks to take a first step towards bridging this gap in the state of knowledge on international bureaucracies. It analyzes the interplay between three intergovernmental treaty secretariats and different non-state actors in three environmental policy areas. In the concluding section, we assess the implications which can be drawn from our three illustrative examples for the debate on the role and function of international bureaucracies in global sustainability governance.

### 3. Conceptualizing Vertical Institutional Interactions

In the past decade, a number of scholars (e.g. Oberthür and Gehring 2006; Breitmeier, Underdal, and Young 2011; Oberthür and Stokke 2011; Zelli and van Asselt 2013; van Asselt 2014) have considerably advanced both the conceptual and empirical research on the institutional interplay in global environmental governance. They have, for example, analyzed the linkages between different international environmental regimes (Oberthür 2001; Kim 2004; Chambers 2008); the interaction of multilateral environmental agreements with economic institutions, especially the *World Trade Organization* (Chambers 2001; Charnovitz 2003; Zelli and van Asselt 2010); and the regulatory overlap of the international climate regime with the *International Civil Aviation Organization* and the *International Maritime Organization* (Oberthür 2003; 2006).

Yet, while these scholars have devoted a great deal of effort to study the *horizontal* institutional interplay (i.e. interactions between institutions at the same level of governance), only little explicit scholarly attention has been paid to the analysis of the *vertical* dimension of the institutional interplay (i.e. interactions between institutions at different levels of governance) in global environmental policy-making (Young 2002). Therefore, this paper joins the new wave of studies within the field of global environmental politics (e.g. Green 2014; Betsill et al. 2015; Hickmann 2016) that analyze “how governance institutions and actors are connecting and working across multiple jurisdictional levels” (O'Neill 2013: 571).

In the present paper, we focus on the vertical institutional interplay between three secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements with non-state actors in global sustainability governance. The primary objective of the paper is to provide a number of illustrative examples of their interactions with different sub-groups of non-governmental organizations operating in the respective environmental policy domain. In our study, we employed three methods of data collection. First, we did a desk study of existing scholarly work on the three international environmental bureaucracies. Second, we carried out a systematic content analysis of official documents, online material, and ‘grey’ literature published by the intergovernmental treaty secretariats as well as their collaboration partners from the group of non-state actors. Finally, we conducted some expert talks with staff members of the secretariats as well as representatives of non-governmental organizations.

## **4. Intergovernmental Treaty Secretariats and Non-State Actors**

Traditionally, the political influence of intergovernmental treaty secretariats has been considered rather limited. This has much to do with the limited resources of these international bureaucracies as well as with the specific problem structure of the environmental policy domain, especially the fear of powerful nation-states that far-reaching international environmental agreements will have negative consequences on their economies. For that reason, nation-states have endowed the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements with relatively narrow mandates. However, in the past few years, it has become obvious that these actors have adopted a more active role in global environmental policy-making and considerably strengthened their outreach to non-state actors – thereby stretching their original mandates in creative ways. In the following paragraphs, we provide some illustrative examples of the activities undertaken by the *Climate Secretariat*, the *Biodiversity Secretariat*, and the *Desertification Secretariat*, which go beyond technical assistance and services to nation-states.

### **4.1 The Climate Secretariat**

The Climate Secretariat has a relatively long history in collaborating with non-governmental organizations. Since the first Conference of the Parties to the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) which took place in 1995, the Climate Secretariat has coordinated the participation of the constantly growing number of observer organizations in the international climate change conferences (Schroeder and Lovell 2012). Moreover, it has taken responsibility of the administration of side-events conducted by all kinds of non-governmental organizations. By this means, the Climate Secretariat creates a forum for these actors and facilitates the informal exchange between different stakeholders that provide input to the intergovernmental negotiations and stimulate debates on a great variety of topics connected to the issue of climate change.

While these activities may still be considered as a rather technical enterprise, the Climate Secretariat has most recently been involved in a number of initiatives that seek to incorporate non-state actors more directly into a policy dialogue. In these initiatives, non-state actors are not merely observers but have become actors which implement actions against climate change by themselves. The new strategy pursued by the Climate Secretariat can mainly be attributed

to Christina Figueres, the former UNFCCC Executive Secretary. The Climate Secretariat has adopted varying roles and functions in these initiatives. In some initiatives, it acts as a facilitator and coordinating node, while other initiatives have been co-led or spearheaded by the Climate Secretariat. In addition, the Secretariat uses the different initiatives for a new communication strategy reaching out to the media. This is in line with what Jørgens and colleagues termed an “attention seeking bureaucracy” (Jørgens et al. 2017).

A prominent example of such an initiative launched by the Climate Secretariat is the *Momentum for Change Initiative* that was officially presented to the public in 2011 (UNFCCC 2011). The proclaimed goal of this initiative is “to shine a light on the enormous groundswell of activities underway across the globe that are moving the world towards a highly resilient, low-carbon future” (UNFCCC 2017a). To this end, the initiative recognizes so-called *Lighthouse Activities*, which are described as innovative and transformative solutions addressing both climate-related aspects as well as wider economic, social, and environmental challenges in a given geographical area. According to the initiative’s webpage, these particular activities are practical, scalable, and replicable examples of what societal actors are doing to cope with the problem of climate change.

Interestingly, the Momentum for Change Initiative has not been directly funded through the Climate Secretariat’s budget since such activities would not have been covered by its mandate. Instead, the team around Christiana Figueres started to establish contacts with private actors to gather funds for the initiative. In this way, national governments could not object to the campaign, a fact that surprised some of those who were involved in the project from the beginning. Since 2012, the initiative confers the *Momentum for Change Awards* to particularly successful climate change mitigation or adaptation projects conducted by non-state actors from around the world.

In the past few years, the Climate Secretariat has put considerable efforts into the further development of this initiative and established numerous partnerships with the private sector to raise public awareness on climate actions taking place on the ground (e.g. UNFCCC 2012; 2014; 2015; 2017b). This example underscores the close interaction of the Climate Secretariat with non-state actors and indicates that the Secretariat has recently taken an increasingly active role in global climate policy-making.

## 4.2 The Biodiversity Secretariat

In the past few years, the Biodiversity Secretariat has also considerably enhanced its outreach activities to non-state actors and developed relationships to external actors below the level of national governments. While non-state actors formally have an observatory status in the international biodiversity regime which is based on the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD) agreed upon in 1992, the Secretariat has taken much effort to incorporate the different sub-groups of non-governmental organizations more directly into the global response to biodiversity loss. In particular, the Biodiversity Secretariat has established special forums and events for non-state actors, provides platforms for the exchange of information among them, and confers awards to those actors that offer particularly promising solutions for biodiversity conservation.

Traditionally, the Biodiversity Secretariat maintains a strong relationship to the business sector. Backed and encouraged by decisions taken at the Conferences of the Parties to the CBD, the Biodiversity Secretariat has established direct interactions with private actors through the organization of various international, regional, and national meetings and workshops (e.g. CBD 2010; 2012). This includes engagement at the Rio+20 conference in 2012 or the annual *Business and Biodiversity Forum* with the purpose of fostering communication with stakeholders and discussing how business can contribute and benefit from the implementation of the targets contained in the CBD. Since 2006, the Secretariat's involvement with the business sector furthermore includes the publication of a *Business Newsletter*, featuring articles and case studies on issues related to the nexus between biodiversity and the business sector (CBD 2017a).

In its endeavor to liaise the business sector with the topic of biodiversity, the Secretariat proposed the *Global Partnership for Business and Biodiversity* in 2010, i.e. an external forum to promote exchange between public bodies and business actors (CBD 2006). Today, the partnership is enacted through a website including a large database, which is designed to support ongoing business engagement activities. In general terms, this initiative allows sharing of information and best practices among businesses from CBD member parties. With this partnership, the Secretariat aims to create a comprehensive strategy to engage the business community with biological conservation. The framework of this strategy incorporates various goals (CBD 2017b).

First, the partnership facilitates the development of a regulative environment by setting standards and boundaries for what companies may or may not do, as well as helping to establish conditions to help businesses act biodiversity-friendly. Second, the partnership supports companies to understand and mainstream biodiversity conservation by forming a business case, enabling companies to influence their supply chains in order to move towards more sustainable production. In this regard, the Secretariat acts in an intermediary body from both top-down as well as bottom-up to induce stakeholders to consider an overarching framework so that producers and small businesses can effectively respond to alterations of the demand and supply chain enforced by larger companies and governments. Third, the partnership seeks to harmonize existing standards and guidelines for businesses where possible. To support these processes, the Secretariat updates and maps relevant standards to avoid confusion and gaps in knowledge to make it easier for businesses to understand and mainstream biodiversity. This suggests that the Biodiversity Secretariat has adopted a crucial task in the international biodiversity regime by encouraging and stimulating the business sector to take measures against biodiversity loss.

#### **4.3 The Desertification Secretariat**

Like the Climate and the Biodiversity Secretariats, the Desertification Secretariat has recently considerably enhanced its collaborative efforts with non-state actors. After intense international negotiations, national governments adopted the *United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* (UNCCD) in 1999 (Corell 1999: 200-202). In terms of its mandate, the Desertification Secretariat's responsibilities include the support of the Conferences of the Parties to the UNCCD and the related subsidiary bodies and providing them with services to compile and transmit reports, facilitate assistance to affected developing country parties, particularly those in Africa, coordinate its activities with the secretariats of other relevant international bodies and conventions, to enter contractual arrangements, prepare reports on the execution of its functions and to perform such other secretariat functions as may be determined by the Conference of Parties (UNCCD 1994: 21-22). Yet, in the past few years, the Desertification Secretariat has moved beyond its original tasks and actively seeks to outreach to non-state actors in order to push for progress in the fight against ongoing desertification, land degradation and related problems.

In its outreach to non-state actors, the Desertification Secretariat has placed special emphasis on awareness building. In particular, the Secretariat has created a so-called *Knowledge Hub* under which it has launched different campaigns to direct the attention of different sub-groups of non-governmental organizations to issues related to desertification, such as land degradation neutrality, sustainable land management, and drought (UNCCD 2017c). A prominent initiative is the campaign on the *Great Green Wall*, labeled ‘Growing a World Wonder’, which combats desertification in Sub-Saharan Africa. This campaign aims to enhance awareness of the initiative in public spheres, policy debates, as well as the media and cultural sectors with the goal of inspiring long-term public and private investment. In this capacity, the Desertification Secretariat works together with various external actors, including the *Global Environment Facility* and *World Bank* that provide funds to certain initiatives undertaken by the Desertification Secretariat (UNCCD 2017b).

Another initiative launched by the Secretariat to collaborate with public and private actors is the *Soil Leadership Academy*. It is a public-private partnership that aims to equip policy-makers with comprehensive tools to achieve one essential goal of the UNCCD: land degradation neutrality. The program is designed and structured as a training event in a workshop format with a curriculum that is guided by the special needs and priorities of the participants. Thereby, the *Soil Leadership Academy* draws on the existing knowledge, available data, and various best practices of its institutional partners, and functions as a knowledge-broking body providing concrete insights on ways to achieve land degradation neutrality and offering opportunities for direct cooperation among relevant actors in regions prone to desertification (UNCCD 2017d).

Furthermore, the Desertification Secretariat recently established a strategic communication platform, called the *Global Land Outlook*, which brings together groups of international experts and various partner organizations. This platform intends to assess current trends on topics such as land conservation or degradation and loss, as well as to identify opportunities for sustainable land management policies on the international and national level. In addition, it spreads knowledge on the issue of desertification through book publications and a working papers series on best practices for sustainable land management. The platform is formally coordinated by a former staff member of the World Bank and maintained by the Desertification Secretariat. Currently, the Secretariat advocates for further participation of individuals and organizations in this initiative on a regular basis (UNCCD 2017a).

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the interplay of international environmental bureaucracies with non-state actors in different environmental policy domains. After a general discussion of the growing recognition of international bureaucracies in world politics and a brief conceptualization of the vertical dimension of institutional interactions, the paper provided three examples which underline the fact that the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements aim to incorporate non-state actors into the global response to environmental problems. This indicates that intergovernmental treaty secretariats have considerably expanded their political influence in the past few years and carry out a number of policy-making tasks. These insights challenge classical approaches to international politics, which presume that the nation-state constitutes the only relevant player in world politics. This theoretical perspective is in urgent need of revision, since it neglects the various problem-solving and decision-making roles and functions of actors other than the nation-state in global affairs (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010).

Furthermore, the examples presented in this paper imply that international environmental bureaucracies have begun to act as ‘orchestrators’ of the various bottom-up projects and programs conducted by different types of non-state actors (e.g. Abbott and Snidal 2010; Abbott et al. 2015). The concept of orchestration has been defined as “a process whereby states or intergovernmental organizations initiate, guide, broaden, and strengthen transnational governance by non-state and/or sub-state actors” (Hale and Roger 2014: 60-61). Building upon this concept, it can be argued that intergovernmental treaty secretariats are enhancing the overall effectiveness of global sustainability governance by coordinating the myriad initiatives undertaken by sub-national governments, private corporations, and civil society organizations (van Asselt and Zelli 2014; Betsill et al. 2015; Chan et al. 2015). In principle, this approach could further be expanded in order to allow non-state to reach an even more substantial impact.

These ideas bear important policy implications and point to important avenues for further research. In every policy domain where collective action dilemmas have to be overcome and the interests of nation-states diverge, international bureaucracies can contribute to solving transboundary problems by reaching out and trying to coordinate and steer the initiatives of non-state actors towards coherence and good practice (e.g. Abbott and Hale 2014). More specifically, when intergovernmental negotiations get stuck in gridlock, international

bureaucracies might turn to the broad range of non-state actors to mobilize advocacy, create demonstration effects, or otherwise pressure national governments for initiating progress in multilateral treaty-making (cf. Abbott 2014). Thus, there is a great potential for increased collaboration between non-state actors and international institutions, including both fully fledged international organizations and relatively small intergovernmental treaty secretariats. With regard to the realm of global sustainability governance, it can be acknowledged that a novel way of thinking is possible about the role and function of international environmental bureaucracies. In particular, this paper recommends further strengthening the position of intergovernmental treaty secretariats and opening up the multilateral process for the initiatives of non-state actors in order to push the global response to pressing environmental problems forward.

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