

**The long History of Global Environmental Governance:
The Role of UN-Organizations, 1945-1975**

The first initiative for establishing a global environmental network and authority was launched in 1910 in Graz, when the Swiss natural scientists and explorer Paul Sarasin proposed to his colleagues of the VIII. International Congress of Zoologists to establish “a commission for the global protection of nature“. The effort of the small scientific community was successful, yet short-lived, for Sarasin secured the support of the Swiss federal government which would soon invite 32 delegates of 17 governments to Berne to create the (ephemeral) World Commission on Nature Protection. Some 100 years later, in summer 2012, several thousands of governmental delegates, scientists, experts, NGO activists and other protagonists of civil society are being expected to join the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the so-called Rio plus 20, in Brazil. It is envisaged as a conference at the highest possible level, including heads of states and governments.

If the size of conferences indicates the degree of the dissemination of ideas and political agendas, the late 20th and early 21st century can surely be called “the era of ecology“ (Joachim Radkau). Whereas Paul Sarasin thought of delegates of national governments to frame the future ‘green’ agenda, the range of environmental regimes and action on a global scale today has considerably widened the realms of environmental politics. The number and heterogeneity of the actors involved has increased exponentially. So have the scope, the severity and the complexity of social, ecological and economic problems involved in the human use of the natural world. In contemporary discourse Global Environmental Governance signifies the sum of the many ways in which state actors, international institutions, as well as private actors cooperate with a view to managing their common environmental affairs (Gustave Speth / Peter Haas).

Social and political scientists have studied Global Environmental Governance as a phenomenon emerging since the 1970s/1980s. The *long history* of the growing concern for the environment has, however, been rather neglected so far. In the light of this desideratum the project envisaged analyses the historical roles which international organizations of the UN-system have played in the making of Global Environmental Governance by

1) providing a forum for exchange,

- 2) generating environmental awareness,
- 3) by providing for a clearing house for the resolution of global environmental conflicts, and
- 4) by helping to construct transnational or global environmental regimes since the middle decades of the 20th century.

Our working hypothesis is that select UN organizations, whose outlook on environmental questions varied and continues to vary, reflect the ambiguity inherent in the promise of modernity and development on the one hand, and the protection of the environment including e.g. health, wildlife, and finite natural resources, on the other hand.

The project aims at putting the vague concept of Global Environmental Governance into more concrete terms and seeks to sketch its evolution in its broader historical context. Powerful engines of globalization as well as forums of debate about globalizations' dilemmas, UN organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and especially the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) early on framed concepts about the human relation towards nature, in some instances building on prior agencies within the framework of the League of Nations. Neither the ecological mobilisation of the early 1970s nor the vigorous rise of the concept of "sustainable development" can be thoroughly understood without studying the heterogeneous approaches which these international organizations, and the actors shaping their respective profiles, pursued with respect to environmental questions since the end of World War II. By exploring the environmental issues which surfaced within these bodies the project seeks to bring to surface to ensuing rivalries within the UN family and the part played by the respective UN organizations in preparing and initiating the global environmental agenda up until the founding and early years of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Apparently, the UN-organisations in question generated not only interpretative frameworks informing the growing awareness of an 'environmental crisis' since the late 1960s and during the 1970s. They also were instrumental in providing an arena for the formation of transnational expert communities, which would do both, voice environmental concerns, and offer the empirical evidence and scientific knowledge underlying their demands for the transnational coordination of environmental policies.

Instead of writing an institutional environmental history the project focuses on the UN organizations' role as both,

- 1) arenas in which discourse on the environment is constituted and widely publicized,
- 2) as transmitters of ideas and expertise of a whole range of actors, including the members of international secretariats, political and diplomatic representatives, industrial lobbies, scientific experts as well as protagonists of civil society.

The analysis pays due attention to the communicative interactions of UN member states, and to their changing outlooks, but starts from the hypothesis that international secretariats, expert communities and actors from civil society played a crucial role in shaping the agenda, though not to the same degree the outcomes, of “environmental diplomacy”. Several case studies analyzing the respective contribution of the FAO, WHO, WMO, ECOSOC and UNESCO to environmental governance will work on a set of shared starting questions: Which were the main environmental issues debated in the UNs special organisations; which experts and lobbies were invited to join debates, how were they selected and by whom; which role did the international secretariats play within the context of the current scholarly debate about “invisible governance” (John Mathiason); how were “common spheres” like air, water and (arable) land conceptualized; how and by which means were the concepts and findings on environmental dilemmas transmitted to a broader audience; and finally, which consequences in terms of environmental policy and reality did UN-debates, resolutions, and early environmental regimes have?

Rich empirical data for such a historical research programme can be found in the archives and official documentation of the UN-organisations mentioned above. They host a multifaceted body of evidence for the changing vision of the natural world as seen by the UN family. All case studies will not only focus on files and published texts but also on the rich visual material the organisations produced to illustrate their programs and actions.

The findings will contribute to the environmental history of the UN and to the understanding of the emergence of Global Environmental Governance. Complementary projects on the role of non-governmental actors or other aspects of global environmental governance and environmental awareness may be prepared. Historical research in the archives of the United Nations' special organizations is crucial to deepen our understanding of the long gestation of Global Environmental Governance.