Global Challenges Foundation

Ecological collapse - governance

Reviewed by

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Contemporary ecological risks are increasingly global in scale, scope, and impact with strong levels of interconnection not only across the borders of nations, but across continents. Action to address them, however, has to be taken at both global and national level. The environment is a classic common good: all benefit from healthy ecosystems and a pollution-free planet, while extraction of natural resources and pollution by some compromise the benefit for many.

A number of international institutions oversee monitoring, assessment, and reporting on problem identification and implementation; they set standards, policies, and laws; and they support the development of institutional capacity to address existing and emerging problems at the national level. 1972 marked a major milestone in global environmental governance with the hosting of the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, that culminated into the establishment of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) as the anchor institution for the global environment and with the mandate to among others, address global ecological risks.

The subsequent period post 1972, witnessed the proliferation of global environmental conventions, also known as treaties or agreements, as the main international legal instrument for promoting collective action toward managing ecological risks. Although the number and membership of these conventions has increased dramatically, an assessment of the implementation of the measures promoted through these treaties reveals a very poor record; since 1972, only about one tenth of the hundreds of global environment and sustainable development targets agreed by countries have been achieved or seen significant progress.

About a dozen international treaties deal with global issues including climate change, landsystem change, biosphere change, and chemicals and waste. These include the UN conventions on climate change, biodiversity, migratory species, trade in endangered species, desertification, persistent organic pollutants, among others. The expectation is that when countries implement their obligations under the treaties, the problems will be managed and ultimately resolved. At the national

level, governments have established ministries and authorities to deal with environmental concerns, advocate for ecologically informed decision making, and improve national capacity.

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States voluntarily create international agreements to govern their relations through legal responsibilities. There is, however, no overarching judicial system or a coercive penal system that could ensure effective enforcement of the agreements that deal with environmental issues. Breaches cannot be sanctioned. Compliance and implementation have to be enticed rather than coerced. Environmental agreements such as the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, for example, are explicitly non-punitive: countries face no penalties for not meeting their commitments. Rather, they are facilitative, as international institutions commit to support compliance and implementation. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 72/277 on "Towards a Global Pact for the Environment", seeks to explore how to strengthen the implementation of international environmental law, and international environmental governance.

Additionally, through the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), UN member states are working on a post-2020 global biodiversity framework to be adopted at the 15th Conference of Parties (CoP) to the CBD.

The framework builds on the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and sets out an ambitious plan to implement broad-based action to bring about a transformation in society's relationship with biodiversity and to ensure that, by 2050, the shared vision of living in harmony with nature is fulfilled. The framework aims to galvanize urgent and transformative action by governments and all of society, including indigenous peoples and local communities, civil society and businesses, to achieve the outcomes it sets out in its vision, mission, goals and targets, and thereby contribute to the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity and other biodiversity related multilateral agreements, processes and instruments.

Importantly, many countries are implementing their obligations. The Environmental Conventions Index (ECI) measures the implementation of global environmental conventions. The Index is a composite score based on the national reports that member states submit to each convention secretariat and illustrates trends across countries, within countries (across issues and over time), and across the conventions. It highlights the leaders and the laggards and raises questions about the determinants of implementation6. Availability of data, comprehensive regulations, national capacities, cooperation, and funding emerge as important factors.

Reporting is the fundamental mechanism to entice and monitor implementation. National reports on progress in achieving global commitments are part of every agreement. Reporting, however, is a challenge because of low capacity and poor data in countries, an inadequate reporting system that does not always cover the comprehensive nature of the issues, and lack of analysis of and feedback on submitted reports. It is notable, however, that the complexity of the reporting process is not necessarily a deterrent to reporting compliance.

The Ramsar Convention on wetlands, for example, requires countries to report on over 100 indicators and has among the highest reporting rates with member states reporting at close to 90% of the time.

Enforcement mechanisms do not guarantee that international commitments will be implemented, and much less that problems will be solved. Countries, however, care about reputation and can be influenced by ratings and rankings, an approach to global performance assessment that has come to be known as scorecard diplomacy. This form of soft power can shape national policies and outcomes as it goes beyond 'naming and shaming' to 'naming and acclaiming'. It outlines actions that could lead to better ranking and enables learning across peers. Scorecard diplomacy has proven effective in national governance, corruption, human trafficking, environmental democracy, and environmental performance.

Since the 2015 Paris Agreement, the progress on global efforts to address climate change have been slow, despite the growing threat that climate change and other human activities risk triggering biosphere tipping points across a range of ecosystems and scales8. Companies, cities, and countries must raise their ambition to significantly take actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to below the 1.5-degree target and lead the transformation to a low carbon economy, which many see as desirable, inevitable, and irrevocable.