Policy Processes that Shape International Environmental Governance

The policy process in international environmental institutions has six stages:

1. problem definition,
2. policy negotiation,
3. adoption of the policy by nation states,
4. implementation,
5. compliance, and
6. evaluation.

Compliance is determined by the extent to which the parties implement the given policy. Evaluation is the stage of examining the degree of effectiveness in dealing with a given problem. These stages comprise a typical policy cycle. However, characterizing the policy process in a way that assumes that the completion of one stage automatically leads to a successful next stage risks the erroneous assumption that policy, once established, will be implemented effectively. In turn, it further risks the flawed assumption that policy will automatically generate a desire for continuing compliance by those involved.

In practice, the policy process is highly complex because politics and social influences permeate scientific facts and ‘rational’ action. When policy debates take place, those with privileged access to the policy process often frame the environment in question and its problems in ways that reflect their own experiences, in what is termed an actor's knowledge claim. However, as Hannigan states, ‘Environmental problems and solutions are end-products of a dynamic social process of definition, negotiation and legitimation’. Understanding whose knowledge influences the construction of an environmental problem is key to knowing...
whether international environmental policy will result in the intended outcome. Demeritt, in describing different knowledge claims of the same forest, discusses how ‘very different programs of actions flow from these competing constructions’. Domestic politics fuel the political debate at the international level, thereby influencing what knowledge is presented in policy debates.

Knowledge claims of those people with privileged access to the policy process and the approaches by which such claims are legitimized determine the solutions that policy-makers select to address an environmental problem. In other words, certain knowledge claims, derived from both domestic politics and personal or organization experience, shape the direction of policy debates, thereby affecting how policy-makers understand environmental problems. These knowledge claims then shape policy solutions.

The result of such selective appropriation of knowledge can lead to ineffective solutions. For instance, Forsyth discusses how the concept of ‘shifting cultivation’ was framed as automatically degrading, with no need to discuss the different cultivation patterns of which some might have been degrading and others not. Such an understanding of shifting cultivation resulted in solutions that were not always conducive in improving the management of the environment. Bebbington and Batterbury show how ineffective solutions to environmental degradation in many developing countries are a result of the erroneous understanding of the problem as caused by smallholders unsustainably intensifying agricultural production in areas of increasing population.

Hamilton, Ives and Messerli, and Forsyth discuss how erosion in the Himalayas is ineffectively addressed because erosion is considered a phenomenon that is always due to increases in population and the subsequent intensification of agricultural practices. These scholars however show how the causes of erosion in the Himalayas often stem from large-scale land clearance and lowland floods that are not a result of farming. The usual policy solutions involving changing farming practices and reducing population size are therefore inappropriate.

The environmental problem in the Himalayas discussed above is a result of the framing of the problem as erosion caused by farming. Forsyth describes framings as ‘the principles and assumptions underlying political debate and action’. In discussing the problems with framings in relation to global policy processes, Forsyth states, ‘universalistic generalizations about risks may often be taken as accurate representations of global environmental problems, but they may explain change in simplistic or inaccurate terms, and appear irrelevant and intrusive to people who are told to accept them’.