7

Building Better Outcomes for International Environmental Governance

Proposals to reform IEG are not new. Participants and observers of the systems, institutions and processes of IEG have become increasingly frustrated with the current outcomes of IEG and have offered proposals for reforms needed. There is growing evidence that IEG has not met widely held expectations, in terms of stated policy objectives or effective outcomes. Some reforms in IEG are underway, but the extent to which they will improve the outcome of IEG is unclear.

Many of the proposed changes to IEG share a major weakness: the assumption that IEG can be effective on its own. That the root causes of environmental problems affect objectives agreed to by governments are not factored into international environmental policies. These root causes include forces underlying environmental problems such as over-consumption, ecologically unsustainable technologies, the south–north flow of resources, developing countries’ debt burdens, unregulated transnational corporations and the overall impact of trade on the environment. These root causes are also often tied to a global trend in liberalized markets. Globalization without adequate consideration of competing political, economic and environmental objectives of various countries is another factor. Spatial differentiation, behaviour and impact of resource users are another consideration. All of these root causes can negatively affect policy outcomes. Any proposal for reform should require taking into account these political and economic forces. Failing to doing so will simply result in marginal changes to the outcome of IEG.

Tackling the root causes of environmental problems is highly political. Root causes are at the heart of national economies, and countries guard their interests zealously. Without addressing these root causes, it will be impossible to arrive at reasonably satisfactory outcomes in the face of enduring structural and political realities. Political and economic
influences such as competing trade interests of countries as well as many social and cultural influences affect international environmental policy processes.

By examining the policy processes of institutions of IEG in this book, I have identified how those people operating within them exercise their political and economic agendas and objectives. They interact with one another within specific institutional, social and cultural contexts, which shape the outcome of IEG. These contexts include the formal guiding principles by which institutions identify and undertake their work, the informal social systems of interaction between people, the relationships that people have established between one another based on cultural and political ties, and the personal agendas and interests of the people involved in any given policy process.

The policy process and the outcome of international environmental governance

The manner in which policy-makers frame the environment and environmental problems affects the direction of the entire policy process and ultimately the outcome for IEG. Certain ‘facts’ and accepted norms of behaviour become taken as truth even though these are often only the knowledge claims of those people who have privileged access to the policy process.

An unquestioned routine evident in both the UNEP and CBD case studies is the taken-for-granted drawing of boundaries around social groups, for example, certain sectors of government. Yet, these groups are not the only ones that affect the way in which the environment is used and managed. This practice shapes policy in ways that may not be practicable in changing the behaviours of other groups who interact with the environment in quite different ways. For example, Chapter 3 showed how taken-for-granted practices in the case studies’ policy processes resulted in framings primarily by policymakers in the Ministries of Environment, Agriculture and Foreign Affairs of the environmental problems. The solutions that then flowed from their framings reflected their particular claims about the environment. They made unsupported assumptions about how other people would change their behaviour to solve environmental problems.

These excluded the fact that sectors of national and local government dealing with forestry, fisheries, water and land use often frame the environment in different ways. At the local sites examined in Kenya some actors view the environment as a resource for commercial gain, others consider it