SPECIAL SECTION

Methodological Innovation in the Study of Global Environmental Agreement Making

Edited by Hannah Hughes, Kimberly R. Marion Suiseeya, and Alice B. M. Vadrot

Forum

Being There: International Negotiations as Study Sites in Global Environmental Politics

Kate O'Neill and Peter M. Haas

Abstract

This forum traces the emergence of international negotiations as study sites in the field of global environmental politics, from its early days until the present. It sets the scene for the research articles in this special section, outlining why their contributions are timely, and takes advantage of advances in methods and conceptual analysis. The articles in this special section suggest the value of direct observation and ethnography in driving conceptual innovation and understanding how power and influence are exercised in such settings (including by the traditionally powerless). In doing so, they encourage debate over and offer new insights into processes the GEP field has been studying for close to fifty years.

The study of global environmental politics (GEP) and multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) has become increasingly broad in the last fifteen to twenty years. Early studies of MEAs and environmental regimes tended to focus on interstate behavior and the role of international institutions (Haas et al. 1993; Kay and Jacobson 1983; Kay and Skolnikoff 1972). The focus soon shifted away from individual MEAs toward issue-based governance regimes that encompassed all the "rules, norms, principles and decision-making procedures" within a particular issue area, including but going beyond MEAs (Downie 2005; Hurrell and Kingsbury 1992; Haggard and Simmons 1987; Krasner 1983; Young 1994,

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among others). Authors quickly realized that regimes were institutional venues commanding analytic attention and that enabled nonstate actors to acquire and exercise influence (Haas 1989; Young 1991). Subsequent work focused on the effectiveness and impacts of international regimes and global environmental governance more generally (Bernauer 1995; Haas et al. 1993; O'Neill 2017, chapter 5), although this has fallen off in recent years (Andresen 2013). More recent scholarship has analyzed the shape and impacts of the participation by multiple actors, and by different groups of actors, in MEA negotiations, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), science and epistemic communities, international secretariats, and the private sector, in addition to the more traditional states and international organizations (Betsill and Corell 2008; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Jinnah 2014; Kanie et al. 2014; Levy and Newell 2005; O'Neill 2017; O'Neill et al. 2004).

More recently, scholars have looked at MEAs as a system (Orsini et al. 2019). Some treat them as political contexts that shape the political opportunity space for actors (Alter and Meunier 2009; Biermann et al. 2009; Keohane and Victor 2011; Raustiala and Victor 2004), while others treat them as complex systems requiring distinctive modes of analysis (Kim and Mackey 2014; Orsini et al. 2013, 2019; Young 2017). These intriguing features of MEAs call for new approaches. Complexity calls us to focus on the understandings of the negotiators and participants in MEAs, to get a handle on their emergent properties and capacities to reproduce and/or strengthen regimes over time.

There has in recent years been a convergence of interest in the dynamics of summitry and their implications and in how individuals and organizations influence outcomes on the floor. Academics have become so numerous at international environmental negotiations that they now have their own category of NGO, the "RINGO" (research international NGO). These attendees are most likely there to advise on their area of expertise or to take advantage of a unique confluence of relevant actors to advance research on a specific topic. But some are there to study the actual negotiations, using multilateral environmental negotiations, and the interpersonal, intergroup dynamics at and around meetings as the sites and/or objects of research.

If we problematize international environmental negotiations and meetings as venues where regime actors update their own understandings, often through interactions with others, our attention is drawn to the techniques by which actors promote their interests and interact with others. Methods that have been presented to capture parts of this process include narratives and discourses (Alker 1996; Esguerra 2014), network analysis (Green 2013; Victor et al. 2018), and participatory-action research (Reitan and Gibson 2012). In addition, there are studies that draw on the indispensable work of the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* team (Chasek and Wagner 2012)—and firsthand accounts of lead diplomats and administrators (Benedick 2007; Tolba 1992). Others have examined the importance of theater in international negotiations (Death 2011) and of summit fatigue (VanDeveer 2003).

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The pieces in this special section shed light on the process by which marginalized groups seek to exercise influence in large conference settings. Specifically, they add to this literature by circumventing a focus on interstate dynamics, drawing our attention instead to the "powerless" and to new forms of interaction, contention, and "moments of influence" (Witter et al. 2015). In this, they echo early critical literatures in the field (e.g., Conca 2005, 2006; see also the essays in Lipschutz and Conca 1993; Wapner 2003; Martello 2001) and conceptual writings about the multiple dimensions or faces of power (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Gaventa 1980; Lukes 1974; Wrong 1988).

In 2014, a special issue of this journal was devoted to collaborative event ethnography (CEE) at the 10th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Nagoya in 2010.[1] CEE deploys large teams of researchers at international meetings to observe submeetings, side events, hallway interactions, and so on, to build collective ethnographic accounts of, for example, roles of specific actors or the diffusion of specific norms or ideas across the conference (Campbell et al. 2014).

Many existing accounts do not engage with making the invisible or intangible aspects of negotiations visible, such as observing interpersonal interactions at meetings within a global environmental COP or in the hallways, aiming to capture the subtler dynamics of these particular diplomatic processes and the ways many more actors than originally assumed fit into the process. The CEE project was an exception, although the sheer size of its team and the ground it needed to cover made it hard to raise funding needed for ongoing attendance at that scale. Another challenge is simply the sheer number of meetings and processes at the sub-COP level. Important decisions happen everywhere, but now we are starting to have means to make sense of the why, who, and how, not just in this collection but in ongoing work by other scholars.

The four articles in this special section offer very different insights into these questions, while maintaining MEA negotiations as their study site. All seek to make conceptual innovations: identifying and tracking weighted concepts and deliberative ecologies, reconceptualizing influence to make Indigenous Peoples' power visible, and taking feminist intersectional approaches to CEE. In this regard, all of the articles are attempting to challenge and unpack the power embedded in research to shape what comes into view and what scholars perceive as more or less important.

The articles by Hughes and Vadrot and by Suiseeya and Zanotti in this section present results derived from time spent observing meetings on site. Hughes and Vadrot's article focuses on interactions in one room (metaphorically) at a meeting of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services. This "single-room" approach allows them to anchor what

1. Lisa Campbell, Noella Gray, and Catherine Corson, eds. Studying Global Environmental Meetings to Understand Global Environmental Governance: Collaborative Event Ethnography at the Tenth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Special Issue, *Global Environmental Politics* 14 (3), 2014.

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might otherwise be too diffuse an analysis of a weighted concept's take-up and the contestation around it. Suiseeya and Zanotti's article travels through COP 21 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (held in Paris 2015), accompanying Indigenous Peoples' representatives and following social media and other external interactions.

Pickering's article zooms out and observes MEA negotiations as an interlocking set of systems, viewed holistically. Paterson's article sees the sites of negotiations as an opportunity for harvesting network data to more fully describe that networked politics involved in international negotiations and provide richer explanatory accounts.

Why Now?

One of the questions that emerges from these papers is, why now? Why is this a propitious time in general to pay attention to research design and methodological approaches and to new (or newly popular) sites of research (O'Neill et al. 2013)? There are three sets of answers to this question.

First, the nature of large-scale conferences has attracted more attention from researchers, particularly in the environmental area, starting with the huge numbers of nonstate actor participants at the 1992 Earth Summit. Something about the current shape and structure of COPs and related meetings—their dynamism and the density and diversity of actors in attendance—transcends their direct objectives and allows them to become venues for much broader fields of inquiry within a brief and intense time frame of two weeks or less. This is particularly true of the "mega"-conferences and negotiating processes—the UNFCCC, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and summits such as Rio +20. These negotiations now attract opportunities to leverage broader, more diverse and subtler forms of influence and create new interactions or alliances (Suiseeya and Zanotti, on Indigenous Peoples' organizations at COP 21).

While attention to conference diplomacy had been highlighted since 1968 (Haas 2002; Kaufmann 1968) and had been a feature of the research on UN Conference on humans and the Environment (UNCHE), held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1972 (Ivanova 2010), attention has mounted given the ease of access to megaconferences, their increased frequency in the environmental realm, and the emergence of civil society "parallel summits" at UNCED 1992 and beyond. At the individual regime level, the proliferation of types of actors as represented by the alphabet soup of official UN Observer designations (O'Neill 2019) also highlighted the diversity of voices present. The differences between regimes in this respect raise fascinating but understudied research questions (with a few exceptions, e.g., Jinnah 2014).

Second, recent years have seen a transdisciplinary turn in GEP that has encompassed the interpretive social sciences and humanities as well as more work that looks to integrate ecology and conservation sciences. The field of

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international relations (IR) more generally has become more open to interpretive techniques imported from the humanities, although often treated as an additional way of adding granular appreciation of causal mechanisms in multimethods research. Scholars who are trained in and willing to deploy ethnography—such as the CEE group (but maybe others)—have pushed approaches that take observing and drawing inferences from human interactions seriously, even if the time frame is two weeks rather than months to years. Observing and documenting a moment of unanticipated crisis in what looked like routine discussions over a document related to biodiversity and culture becomes an opportunity to deploy insights from Bourdieu's sociological theory. What others might identify as linguistic or discourse analysis, along with that of body language and expression, would not be possible to conduct without the actual presence of researchers (Hughes and Vadrot). This is something trained journalists can do, but the connection to theory, such as observing and explaining the real-world trajectory of a concept, such as biocultural diversity, means new scholarly contributions can go further toward informing understandings of global political outcomes.

This turn has also fostered inclusion of the marginalized—e.g., Indigenous Peoples—in studies of international politics and integration of vertical scale into analysis, from local to global (Suiseeya and Zanotti). Similarly, multi-sited ethnography (and fieldwork) that takes the global seriously has become more common in geography and political ecology (Bair 2005). Social-ecological systems scholarship (Ostrom and Cox 2010) has opened the doors for new variants on systems theory (Pickering). Related to this point are the insights into the political strategies and techniques available to groups traditionally regarded as weak and the role of contingency in deploying influence in large, complex institutional settings (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Katzenstein and Seybert 2018).

By leveraging the use of symbols and coordinating pressure in multiple physical locales, Indigenous Groups successfully put respect for human rights into the Paris Agreement preamble. In the case of biodiversity, Indigenous Groups followed similar campaign strategies. In biodiversity, we also see the residual effect of decisions about organizing concepts that were used to frame deliberations. Such analysis not only describes the ways in which traditionally marginalized groups seek to influence discussions but also helps identify tactics and techniques not often associated with specific negotiated outcomes.

Third, we are witnessing innovations in terms of available methodological tools and technologies (O'Neill et al. 2017). Online tools and applications enable more sophisticated network analysis and visualizations. There is more emphasis on collaborative research—and fieldwork—in qualitative GEP. The very size and complexity of the negotiations themselves require collaborative work: listening to or watching sessions, coordinating findings and notes, adapting as they go, and compressing a year's work of ethnographic fieldwork into two short weeks. There is more openness on the part of qualitative (social science)

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scholars to adopt these approaches and tools and to grapple with "big data" and transdisciplinary communication.

The following four articles deploy a wealth of methods: process tracing, network analysis, ethnography, discourse analysis, linguistic analysis, systems theory, and visualization. This diversity reflects the need for multiple tools and frameworks to meet the challenges of today's environmental problems. While the methods selected by these authors are not, in and of themselves, new, they draw on a range of approaches that have rarely been applied in GEP and/or IR theory. The methods also reveal surprising outcomes and help to account for the thorough interpretive and explanatory mechanisms. For instance, we see the appearance of principles proposed by Indigenous People organizations in the preamble to the Paris Agreement, which expressly embraces human rights goals. The authors provide direct evidence of network linkages rather than ascribing them or inferring them from evidence from organizational charts and participation lists. This provides greater insight into group dynamics than black boxing them in discussions of outcomes and correlating them with hypothesized independent variables. In addition, we see the path-dependent effects of consolidated ideas in regime negotiations. This combination, along with these three "why now" factors, underlies why this symposium makes strides forward in ways of addressing global environmental problems, which could only be done by working at and within environmental negotiations.

Contributions, and Moving Forward

It is helpful to locate this enterprise in the broader context of GEP and IR. While we commonly recognize that actual negotiations are rife with multiple actors, have unclear and shifting interests, and are subject to contingency, conventional approaches still aspire to explaining outcomes. The following articles come from more interpretive roots and are focused on understanding and describing the processes of negotiation. They offer a granular focus on those who wield influence, and how.

The authors in this collection suggest the utility of applying unconventional methods as a way of revealing previously invisible actors and structures and allowing for conceptual innovation and diffusion. The studies are grounded in familiar venues for many GEP scholars—the meeting halls and corridors of international environmental meetings—but focus attention on dynamics and marginalized groups often neglected by mainstream approaches and research designs that privilege the powerful actors in the international system. Such calls are echoed in the broader field of IR theory. For instance, a small but recent literature in IR on ethnography (e.g., Brigden 2016; Montsion 2018; Sabaratnam 2017) builds on its earlier emergence and use in feminist IR theory (Vrasti 2008).

Three factors could help push such approaches further in terms of influencing GEP scholarship and entering into conversation with IR theory, factors that counter common critiques of such approaches. The first is to stress

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the value added of new, different, or unconventional methods. For example, how do ethnographic approaches provide additional insight compared with, say, participant observation? The second is contingency. In a discipline becoming more obsessed with generalizability and predictive theory, how does one address their critiques that humanities approaches may stress events that are singular, or relationships—networks—that may be fleeting, and depend on the individuals within them. A third is highlighting politics, indeed, engaging with "old school" arguments and hypotheses about GEP and the dynamics of negotiations. How would one weigh competing hypotheses about the sources of collective agreement on bargaining texts: by the weighted concepts themselves or the power of the parties promoting those concepts?

The articles in this special section suggest the value of direct observation and ethnography in driving conceptual innovation and understanding how power and influence are exercised in such settings. In doing so, they encourage debate over and new insight into processes the GEP field has been studying for close on fifty years.

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