

The Unsuccessful Plea for an Honourable Cause:
Why the Idea of a World Environmental Organisation fails to enthrall

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Comprehensive Abstract

To date, no overarching international organisation exists to effectively take control over environmental issues in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) comes closest in both form and mandate to the passionately advocated World Environmental Organisation (WEO), but many observers consider and dismiss UNEP as an institutional failure. Given the state of the global environment and the lack of an authoritative body in the environmental policy-making field, the idea that some form of a WEO is needed has deep roots and dates from the late sixties; one could readily state that the debate for a WEO has not seized since the creation of UNEP in 1972. With the conclusion of the reform process of the United Nations Organisation (UN) looming large on the horizon in 2009 and making its way through the diplomatic merry-go-round, advocates for a WEO feel that this may be the perfect opportunity to press their case for fundamental changes on the International Environmental Governance (IEG) scene. With the idea of the conception of a new organisation on the wildly compelling and highly cherished environmental plane, one would expect ubiquitous enthusiasm and positive input to be stirred, and a sheer endless wave of supporters and advocates to be brought in line. With all noses pointing in the same direction, and given the urgency of the mission - with desertification on the rise and rainforests being chopped down at the highest rate in the history of mankind, ice caps melting and panda bears on the brink of extinction - a WEO must be the most sensible solution to everyone, right?

Not quite. Seldom has a proposition for an important structural change been met with such tepid and half-hearted response. Not only states have protested with the to-be-expected classic arguments (too costly, too meddlesome), but more surprisingly also civil and social stakeholders (e.g. NGOs) do not seem convinced of the good of the idea of a WEO. And based on the evidence and arguments that have been put forth, we argue that they are right not to be so. Examining the debate that has been going on for the last 35 years, one cannot help but sense that it has failed in its core business: enthralling people for the worthy cause of improving the level of environmental protection through an upgraded IEG system. Some important arguments have not been adequately advocated; others have been hastened and are not ripe to stand the test of a larger debate, if not harmful for the cause of a WEO in themselves. It is here that this article intends to make a contribution to the debate.

This article investigates the reasons why the idea of a WEO is not met with unambiguous vigour and universal acceptance. We argue, firstly, that many of the critiques on the existing structures, and more particularly UNEP, are imbalanced, not univocal, and therefore not convincing. Secondly, we examine some of the proposed alternatives to the present system, and find that most of these ideas, while interesting as a starting point, could spark opposition against the sought change. Lastly, the article gives an overview of the recent past and ongoing diplomatic efforts in the debate on an improved IEG structure, and points out some of the present stalemates.

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