

Global Environmental Governance In Transition: Assessing UNEP's Influence On Climate Policy In The 21st Century

Awadhut Vitthal Borkar¹, Subham Tripathy²

¹UGC Senior Research Scholar Government Vidarbha Institute of Science & Humanities, Amravati, India
Email: aviborkar97@gmail.com

²UGC Senior Research Scholar, School of Political Science Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur, India
Email: subhamtripathyjiku@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper critically examines the evolving role of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) within global environmental governance, particularly focusing on its influence on climate policy throughout the 21st century. As a central yet contested actor amidst an increasingly fragmented and polycentric governance landscape, UNEP navigates complex institutional arrangements, shifting normative frameworks, and multilevel actor constellations. Employing a qualitative research design based on comprehensive secondary source analysis and in-depth case studies, including the Paris Agreement 2015, subsequent Conference of the Parties (COP) sessions, climate adaptation and finance mechanisms, and the Global Stocktake 2023, this study assesses UNEP's normative, coordinative, and operational contributions. Findings indicate that while UNEP has been instrumental in agenda-setting, scientific synthesis, and catalysing private sector engagement, its effectiveness is constrained by chronic funding limitations, institutional fragmentation, and competing geopolitical interests. Despite these challenges, UNEP remains vital in shaping global climate norms and facilitating cooperation across diverse actors, suggesting paths for institutional reform and enhanced relevance in an evolving global climate governance architecture.

Keywords: Global Environmental Governance; United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); Climate Policy; Institutional Fragmentation; Paris Agreement; Climate Finance

INTRODUCTION

Global environmental governance refers to the complex system of institutions and actors and regulatory frameworks which work together to handle environmental problems that affect areas beyond national borders and territorial control. The modern environmental governance system operates differently from traditional international politics because it uses state-centric negotiations and treaty-making and formal diplomacy yet it has developed into a distributed pluralistic system. The expanded environment now includes multiple actors who influence agenda-setting and policy implementation and monitoring through their activities as non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations and epistemic communities and subnational governments.

The growth of authority and participation across various sectors results in multiple decision-making systems which create different institutional and normative bases for governance at both horizontal and vertical levels. The governance mechanisms for environmental protection now reach beyond traditional state-to-state treaties because they consist of multiple specialized institutional frameworks that handle specific environmental challenges including biodiversity decline and climate change and desertification and marine contamination. [1] The polycentric and networked governance framework creates challenges for coordination and coherence and accountability but enables policy innovation and learning between different levels and norm-sharing. The platform allows various stakeholders to create new solutions for worldwide problems by using adaptive testing methods and resource pooling and international partnership building which strengthen official government-to-government negotiation processes.

UNEP's Mandate and Historical Background:

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) became the world's first global institution to coordinate environmental activities within the United Nations system when it was established at the Stockholm United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. The new institution became a landmark achievement because it established environmental damage as a worldwide problem which required international institutional collaboration for the first time. The organization started as a coordinating body before it developed into the main international institution which directed global environmental action.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) received its first mandate to coordinate environmental activities but its responsibilities grew substantially throughout the years. The organization established itself as a top scientific authority for environmental change assessment through its influential Global Environment

Outlook reports during the late 1970s and 1980s. The organization expanded its mission to establish environmental policies while helping governments create environmental standards and delivering capacity-building initiatives to developing nations and maintaining responsibility for multiple multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). The agreements starting with the Convention on Biological Diversity and including the Vienna Convention and its Montreal Protocol demonstrated how UNEP gained more power to create international environmental law.

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit created sustainable development as a unifying approach to environmental management worldwide at its most important moment. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adoption strengthened UNEP's position because it took on a supporting function within the climate framework. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) supported scientific and technical work during negotiations through expert dialogues and established environmental policy connections to development targets. National and regional planning needed climate integration to help developing countries manage their institutional and financial constraints for addressing these challenges.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) achieved distinction through its work with civil society organizations and private enterprises and epistemic communities as well as its engagement of multiple actors who exceeded traditional intergovernmental processes. The initiative played a crucial role in creating worldwide environmental understanding while directing public conversations and establishing sustainable practices in official policies and social thinking. The organization shifted its purpose from its original role as a UN coordinating body to become a normative and advocacy-focused organization which supports the modern global environmental governance framework. The framework maintains its importance because it links scientific understanding to policy creation and operational deployment and develops tools which enable vulnerable nations to execute environmental and climate policies. [2]

Research Relevance and Thematic Transition:

The 21st century has brought about significant changes to the global systems that manage climate change. The first few decades of climate governance operated under state-focused treaty systems which required countries to make legally enforceable agreements like the Kyoto Protocol. The models have evolved from conventional methods to flexible decentralized models which support inclusive practices. The system operates through polycentric governance structures which enable multiple state and subnational actors to work with private sector entities and civil society organizations at different levels. The transition brings advanced complexity to coordination systems and accountability structures and norm distribution which creates new difficulties and possibilities for UNEP and other established governance institutions. The assessment of UNEP's role in this evolving world enables people to track worldwide climate policy shifts while creating plans to boost institutional performance. The research focuses on three main questions which analyse UNEP's ability to adjust to new governance actors and methods while handling institutional fragmentation and its effects on climate policy results across different levels. [3] [4]

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Debates on UNEP's Effectiveness in Climate Governance:

Research studies assess UNEP's effectiveness in leading global climate governance through its output legitimacy and its ability to bring together different stakeholders for policy development. The scholars recognize UNEP as a normative leader which functions as a knowledge broker to advance environmental issues in international policy frameworks and assist states and non-state actors with climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. The framework serves as a key element for scientific evaluations which then lead to the spread of sustainability standards that guide official diplomatic talks and domestic policy development. [3] The effectiveness of UNEP coordination in producing climate action remains uncertain because new governance platforms and various international organizations with overlapping responsibilities have appeared. The analytical works demonstrate that UNEP faces two main challenges because of its weak enforcement abilities and its failure to build authority through soft power within its divided institutional framework. [5] The organization encounters two primary obstacles which stem from insufficient resources and insufficient political backing. The UNEP faces criticism because it cannot execute its wide-ranging responsibilities effectively because of organizational and financial barriers which indicate fundamental institutional problems that reduce its lasting effects. [6]

Institutional Legitimacy and Political Challenges:

The assessment of UNEP legitimacy integrates academic and operational perspectives to determine its position in the developing worldwide structure. Research studies about public and elite opinions show positive views

about UNEP operations yet they also identify problems with democratic governance in international organizations and their lack of transparency and accountability systems. [7] The research investigates how UNEP upholds its legitimacy within a regime complex because various actors and competing authorities create difficulties in defining clear lines of responsibility. The present disagreements between these two approaches show the fundamental governance challenges which occur when soft norms function inside hard enforcement systems of transnational environmental policy networks. [5] The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) functions as a soft-power organization because it depends on moral persuasion and normative influence to achieve its goals which enables it to influence member states but does not provide direct authority to enforce compliance and implementation. [8]

Institutional Limitations and Fragmentation in Global Climate Regime:

The global climate governance system exists as a fragmented network of institutions which creates major obstacles for unified policy execution and collective action. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) operates within this polycentric system by working with different entities that include the UNFCCC Secretariat and IPCC and climate clubs which have their own specific roles and member bases. [1] The literature on regime complexes and fragmentation shows that multiple governance systems create three main problems which include increased coordination expenses and authority disputes and redundant work activities. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) exists in an ambiguous state because it works to bring together various organizations while simultaneously fighting for financial support and organizational power. [4] The increasing importance of climate clubs and transnational partnerships creates challenges for UNEP's traditional functions which requires institutional reforms to improve operational capacity and legitimacy and achieve better coherence. [9] [10]

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach:

The research design of this study employs qualitative methods through descriptive and analytical approaches which utilize secondary data for triangulation purposes. The research aims to understand UNEP's diverse functions in global climate governance through a combination of academic studies and official reports and policy evaluations. The research method uses interpretive and exploratory approaches to identify institutional behaviour patterns and normative effects and governance relationships instead of measuring specific impact metrics.

Data Sources and Collection:

The research draws from various academic journals that study environmental governance as well as UNEP institutional management and climate policy development. The official reports from UNEP and UNFCCC documentation and essential policy analyses of Paris Agreement milestones and climate adaptation finance and global stocktaking exercises serve as additional academic resources. [11] [12] The sources create a solid basis to assess UNEP's work through its two main areas of normative and operational activities.

Theoretical Justification:

The research depends on three theoretical frameworks which operate as a unified system. The institutional approach provides understanding about UNEP's organizational framework and its role as an intergovernmental organization and its management systems. The second point demonstrates how constructivism explains UNEP's role in establishing new global norms and agenda-setting and identity transformation for international actors. Thirdly, regime theory frames UNEP within the broader international climate regime complex, highlighting its position vis-à-vis other institutions and the challenges of fragmented governance. [2] [8]

Case Study Selection and Analysis:

The selection of case studies depends on their ability to support UNEP's changing institutional functions and major global climate policy achievements. The Paris Agreement 2015 established a new climate governance system through nationally determined contributions (NDCs) which replaced traditional top-down target setting and the subsequent COPs concentrated on adaptation and finance systems and the Global Stocktake 2023 functions as the present evaluation of worldwide climate achievements. The analysis evaluates UNEP's work in scientific synthesis and normative facilitation and policy coordination through an assessment of its achievements and shortcomings. [13] [3] The criterion-based selection process allows for a complete assessment of UNEP's capacity to adapt and maintain its position as a relevant organization.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Liberal Institutionalism and UNEP's Coordinative Role:

The liberal institutionalist view of UNEP shows how the organization serves as a platform which enables states to work together through cost-efficient operations and information sharing and standard development. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) demonstrates liberal perspective capabilities through its ability to unite different stakeholders and provide technical support which aligns with the liberal approach to institutional problem-solving and trust-building between parties. The system supports multilateralism because it enables data sharing and establishes common environmental standards and achieves better compliance through peer assessment and training programs. The perspective demonstrates how UNEP functions as a tool which helps governments during their negotiations while developing common climate policies for worldwide governance systems. [12]

Constructivism and Norm Diffusion:

Constructivist theory focuses on how international relations develop through social processes while highlighting the influence of conceptual frameworks and social norms and individual and collective identities. The United Nations Environment Programme functions as a norm entrepreneur to establish new global environmental standards which direct actors toward understanding climate change as a security threat and an equity and intergenerational justice concern. The scientific assessments and normative statements presented by UNEP about climate challenges enable the creation of new norms which guide state behaviour and draw nonstate actors into environmental governance through norm adoption. The EU uses normative power to create worldwide agendas which require countries to change their behaviour even though these actions exceed its treaty-established authority. [8]

Regime Theory and Fragmented Climate Governance:

Regime complexes in regime theory describe how different governance institutions work together through their connected systems to address climate change. The United Nations Environment Programme functions within a complex system of multiple centres which includes different actors who perform related duties. The theoretical framework helps researchers study UNEP's dual role because it unites its work to achieve harmonization with its competitive pursuit of resources and influence in intricate institutional environments. The paper highlights problems that result from overlapping institutions and poor coordination and insufficient governance in the global climate system. [1] [4]

Case Studies

UNEP's Influence on the Paris Agreement 2015:

The Paris Agreement created a new international climate governance system through its adoption of flexible national contribution systems instead of mandatory emission targets. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) fulfilled a vital function through its work of scientific synthesis and its support for preparatory dialogues and negotiation framework development. The initiative helped create standards for voluntary commitments and transparency systems and launched the Global Climate Action Agenda to bring nonstate actors into the process. Through its work on stakeholder network development the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) helped countries achieve better climate targets through technical support. However, its influence was limited in terms of enforcing compliance or resolving contentious equity and burden-sharing issues inherent in the agreement. [2] The implementation of orchestration initiatives to engage subnational and private actors demonstrates UNEP's adaptive method for increasing participation yet the organization faces ongoing difficulties to produce quantifiable emission reduction outcomes. [14]

Post-Paris COPs and UNEP's Adaptation and Finance Mechanisms:

Following Paris, UNEP has intensified efforts in facilitating climate finance, particularly supporting the Adaptation Fund and tracking financial flows to developing countries. The convening power of UNEP enables the organization to bring together resources for adaptation needs while supporting countries to follow their national climate plans and enhancing the tracking methods of climate finance. The existing financing gaps continue to exist because of insufficient transparency and accountability issues and different views between developed and developing nations regarding funding distribution and implementation. [11] The climate regime faces additional challenges because UNEP must coordinate multiple financing mechanisms which require better cooperation and investment clarity to achieve effective scaling up. [3]

UNEP and the Global Stocktake 2023:

The Paris Agreement created the Global Stocktake process to conduct periodic evaluations of worldwide climate goal performance. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) provides essential support through

data collection and policy discussion facilitation and scientific interpretation which helps member states increase their climate targets. The mechanism allows UNEP to establish transparency and accountability which enhances the ongoing policy development and learning processes. The stocktake faces two major obstacles which prevent it from achieving its full potential because of insufficient political backing and state cooperation. The United Nations Environment Programme needs to preserve scientific objectivity when handling political issues that affect its ability to win national trust and achieve international cooperation. [3]

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

UNEP as Norm Entrepreneur and Agenda Setter

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) shows that climate change functions as a complex issue which threatens security and requires equitable solutions for sustainable development. The organization produces scientific research and normative statements which now influence worldwide discussions about connecting climate change to development and security frameworks. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) demonstrates its governance network expansion through its work with various actors including states and private sector entities and civil society organizations. UNEP achieves its goal of climate governance system innovation through its support of experimental governance projects and collaborative efforts although these efforts show inconsistent results between different geographic areas and economic sectors. [1] [15]

Coordinating Role amid Institutional Complexity:

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) faces major challenges because of the extensive duplication and competition between the UNFCCC Secretariat and IPCC and new climate clubs including the Climate and Clean Air Coalition. The United Nations Environment Programme generates vital benefits through its work in networking and scientific synthesis and capacity building yet its effectiveness remains limited because of its disorganized structure and undefined roles. The entities lack proper coordination which results in poor governance and duplicate service delivery risks. The UNEP soft governance toolkit needs innovative approaches to build partnerships and establish strategic positions in the climate governance framework to stay effective. [9] [5]

Policy Influence and Outcomes:

UNEP has made a direct impact on national and subnational climate policies through its work which drives policy adoption while strengthening planning abilities and encouraging private sector participation. The system provides tools which enable countries to convert their international agreements into national rules and programs. The limited hard authority of UNEP together with its restricted resources prevents the organization from effectively enforcing its policies and reaching all areas of the world. The political differences between member states create additional challenges for achieving unified policy results because developed and developing countries continue to show significant differences in their financial capabilities and technology exchange. [6]

Challenges and Prospects

Structural and Funding Limitations

The operational capacity of UNEP remains limited because of ongoing underfunding which restricts its ability to deliver programs worldwide. The organization struggles because it relies on donations which produces unstable funding that hinders both strategic planning and investment decisions for the future. The financial limitations prevent UNEP from making quick responses to new environmental emergencies while maintaining its core scientific and normative work for global governance leadership. [3]

North-South Divides and Equity Challenges:

The climate regime encounters trust issues and cooperation hurdles because of ongoing development stage differences between nations. The United Nations Environment Programme encounters difficulties in uniting these groups because stakeholders hold different opinions regarding their responsibilities and funding needs and technological resources. The Loss and Damage Fund face various obstacles which prevent fair cost distribution and actual help for vulnerable countries. The ongoing equity problems between developed and developing countries create obstacles for UNEP to sustain its legitimacy and fulfil its objectives. [11]

Prospects for Reform and Future Roles:

The revitalization of UNEP can only be realized through the creation of robust and adaptive institutional frameworks that clearly articulate its long-term mission, institutional mandate, and operational priorities. Such frameworks must not only broaden and diversify funding mechanisms, ranging from voluntary contributions and assessed dues to innovative financing models but also strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems capable

of ensuring transparency, accountability, and credibility on the global stage. In parallel, UNEP's leadership role could be significantly enhanced by advancing the integration of emerging environmental concerns, such as plastic pollution, biodiversity degradation, and other planetary boundary issues, within the broader architecture of climate governance. This would allow the organization to position itself as a pioneer of comprehensive and holistic environmental stewardship that bridges fragmented policy silos. [6] [16] [17] Furthermore, the institutionalization of polycentric governance arrangements, characterized by multi-level and cross-sectoral partnerships, would enable UNEP to remain responsive to both shifting global political dynamics and evolving ecological constraints. In doing so, UNEP could consolidate its position as the central coordinating body for global environmental management, fostering a governance model that is more resilient, inclusive, and adaptive to the complexities of the Anthropocene. [18]

CONCLUSION

The research confirms that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has retained its position as a pivotal institution in global environmental governance throughout the twenty-first century, despite undergoing significant institutional transformations and confronting persistent structural challenges. UNEP's normative agenda-setting role, its ability to coordinate across fragmented governance arenas, and its facilitation of scientific knowledge production have collectively contributed to meaningful advancements within the Paris Agreement framework, particularly in relation to adaptation measures, climate finance mechanisms, and the broader architecture of implementation. By shaping discourses, aligning priorities, and mobilizing expertise, UNEP has played an indispensable role in strengthening the legitimacy and coherence of climate governance processes.

Nevertheless, the organization continues to face two structural impediments that constrain its effectiveness. The first stems from entrenched institutional and political divisions, both within the United Nations system and among member states, which limit UNEP's ability to harmonize global priorities and translate normative commitments into binding obligations. The second relates to chronic insufficiency in funding, which undermines the Programme's operational capacity, restricts long-term planning, and generates reliance on voluntary contributions subject to political fluctuations.

The study adopts a multi-theoretical lens, integrating institutionalist and constructivist approaches alongside regime theory, to analyse UNEP's evolving role in the complex and polycentric landscape of global climate governance. This analytical framework highlights not only the institutional dynamics of UNEP but also its normative influence in shaping shared understandings and legitimizing emergent practices. Importantly, it underscores the broader shift within international environmental regimes away from hierarchical, state-centric models toward polycentric systems marked by overlapping authorities, diverse actors, and dispersed sites of decision-making. The complexity of this transformation necessitates nuanced, multi-dimensional analyses capable of capturing both institutional evolution and normative diffusion.

Looking forward, future scholarship could investigate UNEP's deepening engagements with non-state actors, including civil society, transnational advocacy networks, and private sector stakeholders, as these relationships increasingly define the contours of environmental governance. Equally important is a systematic assessment of the ecological and developmental impacts of UNEP's role in climate finance facilitation, particularly in the Global South where climate vulnerability is most acute. For governments and policymakers, the priority lies in enacting institutional reforms that can enhance UNEP's financial stability, clarify its mandates, and establish robust mechanisms of accountability and oversight. At the same time, academic research must continue to trace the shifting operational boundaries of UNEP and the evolving architectures of climate governance, especially in the aftermath of the Global Stocktake, which has recalibrated expectations and introduced new benchmarks for collective progress under the Paris Agreement framework.

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