



Article scientifique

Editorial

2011

Accepted version

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How to cite

BALSIGER, Jörg, DEBARBIEUX, Bernard. Major challenges in regional environmental governance research and practice. In: Procedia: social & behavioral sciences, 2011, n° 14, p. 1–8.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:23454>

Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,
Comparative Designs (REGov)

Major challenges in regional environmental governance research and practice

Jörg Balsiger^{a*} and Bernard Debarbieux^b

^a*Institute for Environmental Decisions, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, Universitätsstrasse 22, 8092 Zurich, Switzerland*

^b*Department of Geography, University of Geneva, Uni-Mail, Av. Pont-d'Arve 40, 1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland*

Abstract

The international workshop “Regional environmental governance: international approaches, theoretical issues, comparative designs” (REGov) – held at the University of Geneva on 16–18 June 2010 – was organized as a collaborative initiative of scholars and practitioners who share a concern with the regional dimensions of environmental governance. The workshop’s overarching objective was to foster constructive encounters and fruitful exchange. To this end, the organizers identified and invited internationally renowned scholars from the fields of geography and political science, as well as senior practitioners from such organizations as the United Nations Environment Programme, European Environment Agency, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, and the European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Areas. Additionally, a competitively selected group of doctoral students and young scholars presented original research. This article presents the major themes and challenges in regional environmental governance research and practice, which were discussed at the REGov workshop. All presentations were recorded and are available as streaming video at <http://reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.

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Keywords: Regions; Regionalism; Regionalization; Environment; Governance; Multilevel governance; Environmental Security; Regional integration.

1. Introduction

The international workshop “Regional environmental governance: international approaches, theoretical issues, comparative designs” (REGov) – held at the University of Geneva on 16–18 June 2010 – was organized as a collaborative initiative of scholars and practitioners who share a concern with the regional dimensions of environmental governance. The workshop’s overarching objective was to foster constructive encounters and fruitful exchange. To this end, the organizers identified and invited internationally renowned scholars from the fields of geography and political science, as well as senior practitioners from such organizations as the United Nations

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 44 632 49 61; fax: +41 44 632 11 10.

E-mail address: joerg.balsiger@env.ethz.ch

Environment Programme, European Environment Agency, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, and the European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Areas. Additionally, a competitively selected group of doctoral students and young scholars presented original research, and a panel discussion on scale in multilevel governance (organized by the COST Action “The Transformation of Global Environmental Governance: Risks and Opportunities”) preceded the REGov Workshop.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the six major themes around which the REGov workshop was organized: (1) What is a region? (2) Environmental regions in multilevel governance; (3) Regional economic dynamics and the environment; (4) Regional security and the environment; (5) New environmental regionalization /regionalism; and (6) Environmental regionalization, democracy, and the environment. Links between these themes were emphasized through three cross-cutting issues: power and the politics of scale; effectiveness and efficiency; and democracy, justice, and ethics. All presentations were recorded and are available as streaming video at <http://reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.

2. Major themes and challenges in regional environmental governance research and practice

Social scientists typically introduce concepts by making them explicit, if not defining them outright, at the very beginning of their texts to make sure that readers understand exactly what the text is about. By contrasts, they rarely do this when referring to objects or places. In gathering papers presented at a conference dedicated to Regional Environmental Governance (REGov), this volume and the conference itself could have started with formal definitions of “governance” and “environment,” both of which widely and diversely used concepts, but leaving aside the term “region,” which usually refers to a kind of spatial object.

This was not the case. The variety of scholars and practitioners who met at the REGov workshop did not need to spend time to agree on what is governance, environment, or environmental governance. Nowadays it is widely admitted that the concept of governance points at more or less formal arrangements adopted for dealing with public issues and involving a wide range of participants, States being only one among them. The concept of environment is more ambiguous. But the conference project was clear on this topic: environmental governance refers to environment as what is external to individuals and social groups or institutions per se, what is around them, the “around” referring to what is usually considered as being natural (water, air, mountains, or biodiversity) or to artifacts or mainly man-made things such as chemical products. Therefore, governance and environment raised no definitional problems in the shaping of this conference.

2.1. Why regions? Why regional?

The concept of a ‘region’ represents a central focus for two main reasons. The first reason is that regions, as one of many possible scale-levels, are not as much mentioned and discussed as the local, the national, and the global for addressing environmental governance. Indeed, during the last two decades, the attention of scientists, politicians, and the media has focused more and more on the so-called global level of the environmental crisis and governance, mainly through the concepts of global warming and global biodiversity as well as the global conferences related to them. This focus has led to important changes, especially in public awareness and in the building of scientific networks, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and international agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol. Yet the emphasis on the global has also been a source of disappointment because some of the conferences produced poor agreements or no agreement at all and some of the global institutions or agreements generated few results. Those still willing to overcome mainly national level definitions of environmental problems and solutions diagnosed the situation as “global convention fatigue” and hence began to invest more on sources of impetus, implementation, and innovation at the regional level. Therefore, the idea of region, especially when the term refers to transboundary or supranational entities, was welcomed by many who were eager to build effective and efficient projects and institutions. Moreover, this interest for the regional level having been raised in both academic and environmental institutions worlds, REGov was organized in order to have representatives of both worlds attend and express their expectations or understanding of regional environmental governance.

The second reason for focusing on regions is that the word itself, already somehow vague on the size of the spatial entity called that way, is also highly ambiguous regarding the nature of the entity. Is regional environmental governance concerned at first with “natural regions”: what some see as existing regions in the natural world? Does regional environmental governance thus aim at finding the most relevant, effective and efficient way of organizing governance within the frame of these “natural regions”? Or are regions in environmental governance mainly institutional entities arising from multi-stakeholder arrangements that correspond more or less, or even not at all, to preexisting areas? The meanings of the word in academic vocabulary and in daily life are indeed very heterogeneous, and the ontological status of the notion as used above is totally different (Moore, 2008). From the very beginning to the very end, the REGov participants could not avoid trying to make explicit the notion.

Indeed, the entire first session was dedicated to comparing various meanings of the word and various implications in terms of knowledge production, political agenda setting, and environmental management. At the end of the conference, it was clear that there were huge differences between materialist and spatialist ways of conceiving the notion – a region as a spatial entity defined according to its inner elements or internal structure (the “identity of a region” as Anssi Paasi calls it) – and an institutional way that views a region as a frame according to which a question is addressed and organizations are set up. For clarifying the difference, the organizers proposed to use “region” for the first of the two meanings, and “Region” for the second one. This kind of sophistication may seem useless for those who believe that regional environmental governance should simply lead to the building of institutions at the very level of pre-existing (e.g. natural regions). But regional entities, even the most natural ones, are not so easy to define: they largely depend on what scientists, experts, stakeholders, and others are looking for. Taking into account the fact that very different kinds of regions can be defined in environmental governance, it is useful to say that “region” is the output of the spatial and cognitive framing of environmental reality. It is also useful to say that “Region” refers to the institutional construct which results from the decision to organize stakeholders or preexisting institutions for coping with environmental issues in this frame. Hence, region refers mainly to problem setting and Region to problem solving.

What is a region? Even though the first question addressed by REGov was very open, it still deserves attention. In order to fully understand regional environmental governance issues, the answer should not so much be looked for by means of a particular epistemic agenda. Instead, it should be searched in ordinary beliefs and statements made by stakeholders and in in/formal agreements made between them. Stakeholders have their own ways of making worlds, natural and social, their own ontologies. Yet addressing regional issues in the social sciences in terms of ontology is not an open door to the realm of metaphysics. It is simply trying to answer the question: “what kinds of entities we refer to when we talk about or describe something, and what do such entities allow us to do?” (Livet, 2000). Then, the interactions between stakeholders, including scientists, either lead to a competition between natural and institutional conceptions or some sort of adjustment. In this vein, and in order to clarify still further scientific issues related to this topic, we found it useful to oppose regionalization (as a manifest process for re-scaling environmental issues) and regionalism (as an ideology with implications in terms of collective identities and individual or institutional commitments).

The participants presenting on this thematic panel were asked to address the following “focusing questions”:

- What kind of information (methods/technologies) do you find especially relevant for identifying a region?
- Can we say for regions what has been said for nations: that they are “imagined communities”? Or are they “imagined territories”?
- Are institutions (including formal organizations) necessary or sufficient contributors to regional recognition?

2.2. *Regions in multilevel governance*

By virtue of its institutional definition, the regional level is conceived as a complement to other levels, notably the global and national levels. Hence, governance in/of/by regions – however regions are defined – requires organizations at multiple levels to work together. Indeed, governance structures for the environment can be found on a multiplicity of levels - global, regional, national and local regimes, norms, and regulatory mechanisms are linked

into a complex institutional architecture. An important debate in global environmental politics has therefore arisen with regard to the advantages and disadvantages of an increasing fragmentation of environmental governance structures (Biermann & Bauer, 2005; Vogel, 1997).

This workshop theme contributes to ongoing research by forging a better understanding of the role of regions in vertically and horizontally linking different governance levels. Theoretically relevant in this regard is the link between regime effectiveness and the ‘fit’ and ‘scale’ of environmental regimes as suggested by Oran Young (2002). Another perspective has been offered by game-theoretic and economic analyses that assess the effectiveness of different “climate coalitions” working as complementary building blocs to the global climate change regime (Eycksmann & Finus, 2007; Sugiyama & Sinton, 2005).

Further analogies could be drawn from discussions about security and economic integration at the regional level, where regions have been perceived as either “stumbling blocks” or “building blocks” to global free trade and world peace. Scholars from different disciplines will thus be asked to contribute to a comparative discussion of the implications of fragmentation and multi-level approaches for global environmental governance.

The participants presenting on this thematic panel were asked to address the following “focusing questions”:

- Which levels/scales (local, subnational, national, supranational, transnational, global, etc.) are particularly relevant for the emergence of regional environmental governance? Is there variation across regions?
- How does the degree of coherence or fragmentation across multiple governance levels support or hinder regional environmental governance? Is there variation across regions?
- What instruments have supported or hindered cooperation and coordination across levels and scales?

2.3. *Regional economic dynamics and the environment*

This conceptual theme sought to redress the neglect of environmental dimensions in the academic literature on regions, which has been dominated by studies of economic integration (and security, see 2.4). This omission is partly surprising, since scholars of the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and international cooperation more generally have long addressed the linkages, contradictions, and complementarities between economic and environmental regimes (e.g. Neumayer, 2004, Winham, 2003), albeit through single case studies rather than from a comparative perspective.

While new regionalist manifestos pay lip service to the environment (e.g. Väyrynen, 2003), the academic literature on regions has largely failed to incorporate relevant conceptual and empirical cues, a lacuna illustrated by the narrow topical scope of recent reviews of regionalism in *Geopolitics* (2007) and *Review of International Studies* (2009). The objective of this workshop theme was thus to revisit key premises in the IR literature on regions from the perspective of environmental governance and examine new regional economic instruments for environmental governance.

A second and equally important objective was to explore new topics, including how economic dynamics related to commodity production cycles generates new regions, such as for oil or coffee. These two objectives give rise to three types of comparative studies. The first type compares actors, institutions, processes, and implications with regard to environmental considerations of regional economic integration initiatives. The second type compares regionally tailored economic arrangements explicitly designed to support environmental governance, especially regional carbon trading systems such as the European Union Emission Trading Scheme. The third type considers new economic regionalization in the form of commodity regions.

The participants presenting on this thematic panel were asked to address the following “focusing questions”:

- What role(s) does the private sector play in shaping regional environmental governance? What commodities and trade patterns contribute to regionalization?

- What change in the debates about the relationship between economy and environment have you witnessed in your area of research/work?
- What shapes the fit (or misfit) of economic and ecological flows? What trends can be observed?

2.4. *Regional security and the environment*

Alongside regional economic integration, security cooperation has been the central theme of most regionalist IR literature. What has been conspicuously absent is a link to the literature on ‘environmental security’ in general (Homer-Dixon, 1999), as well as recent variants such as environmental peace-making (Conca & Dabelko, 2002). This is despite the fact that across disciplines and arenas (both academic and political) increased attention has been paid to the link between threats to environmental sustainability and questions of security throughout the past decade (Diehl & Gleditsch, 2000; Deudney, 1990).

In response to this gap, this research theme parallels Theme 3 and revisits key premises of the regional security literature from the perspective of environmental concerns, and compares the environment-security nexus across different regions and/or specific issues. Particular emphasis has been paid to representation of the different sides in current debates, for instance between those who focus on the regional (and global) conflict potential of accelerating environmental problems such as drought and sea water rise, and those who see environmental degradation as an opportunity for enhanced cooperation and conflict prevention and management.

A third type of perspectives compares how established and new collective regional security arrangements (e.g. Southern Africa) cope with the effects of the regional ecological interdependencies with regard to water-sharing, biodiversity loss, or land degradation.

The participants presenting on this thematic panel were asked to address the following “focusing questions”:

- What features of the environment-security nexus have assumed or lost a regional character?
- How do regional implications of the environment-security nexus shape different actors' understandings of particular regions?
- What instruments have been devised – by whom and where – to address regional environment-security repercussions?
- What ecological and security trends are, or have the potential to drive regionalization?

2.5. *New environmental regionalization/regionalism*

Increasing awareness of the spatial variability of global environmental change is highlighting new commonalities of established regions such as the European Alps or the Antarctic, and creating the potential for the emergence of new environmental regions such as coastal deltas and island systems. Many scholars have suggested that such ‘ecoregions’ are essential for understanding the barriers to - and the means to facilitate – environmental governance because they constitute the areas within which the causes of global change are generated and where the most serious impacts of this change are actually felt (Feldman & Wilt, 1999).

The focus of this workshop theme is on instances of what may be referred to as “new environmental regionalism,” that is the institutionalization of environmental governance at the ecoregional scale. Several such initiatives have been in existence for some time, including the European Union Water Framework Directive’s river basin emphasis, the Alpine Convention, and regional maritime agreements such as for the Baltic Sea, yet many have either received very little scholarly attention or have been addressed solely as single case studies. The types of contributions solicited for this theme consider the emergence, dynamics, achievements, and links to local and global environmental agreements from a comparative perspective.

The participants presenting on this thematic panel were asked to address the following “focusing questions”:

- Environmental regionalization: political “bricolage” or radical geo-socio-political transformation?
- How do environmental concerns influence the difference between regionalism (as an ideology) and regionalization (as a manifest process)?
- What are the roles of collective sense of belonging, collective action and institutional arrangements in environmental regionalism?

2.6. *Environmental regionalization, democracy, and civil society*

Although the emergence, institutionalization, and evolution of environmental regions draw heavily on ecological dynamics and technical knowledge, environmental regionalization is inextricably tied to cultural developments and political processes (Fall, 2005). Environmental regions such as mountain ranges or river basins have to become part of public imagination and debate, which involves the use of symbolic, material, and organizational tools and techniques. For this reason, the degree of legitimacy attached to environmental regionalization is linked to its unfolding through democratic institutions. This presents special challenges in transboundary regions, where the sovereign reach of democratic governance usually stops at a country's borders, even in relatively integrated polities such as the European Union. In many such places, civil society organizations have been successful in bridging political frontiers and promoting environmental goals (Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2008), yet often at the expense of democratic accountability and legitimacy (Allen & Cochrane, 2007). The contributors to this workshop theme addressed the thorny theoretical and practical issues that arise from these tensions, as well as cases that illustrate how civil society actors have negotiated them.

The participants presenting on this thematic panel were asked to address the following “focusing questions”:

- What is the influence of environmental governance and regionalization on democratic processes and representation within and across nation states?
- What is the influence of governance and regionalization on environmental justice and accountability?
- What role does/can/should civil society play in environmental regionalization?

3. **Crosscutting themes**

Beyond the six themes outlined above, the workshop organizers identified three cross-cutting issues.

3.1. *Power and the politics of scale*

Power in all its varied forms is a central aspect of cooperation, competition, and negotiation surrounding environmental politics. Since regions always exist at the interface of the more global and the more local, regional advocates are perennially entangled in the politics of scale. Although regional dynamics are often analyzed in terms of networks, rather than traditional hierarchies, asymmetries in access to knowledge, resources, and decision making arenas play a significant role in determining what constitutes an environmental problem, at what scale it should be addressed, what actors have regional standing, and what solutions can be proposed.

3.2. *Effectiveness and efficiency*

The effectiveness and efficiency of cooperation within environmental regimes have been one of the most important themes in environmental research across the social sciences (Bernauer, 1995; O'Neill, Balsiger & VanDeveer, 2004). The workshop presenters were asked to reflect on the nature and significance of effectiveness and efficiency in their research, as well as their role in bringing about effective and efficient outcomes with regard to global environmental challenges. This cross-cutting issue was specifically, though not exclusively addressed to regional environmental governance practitioners.

3.3. Democracy, justice, and ethics

The third cross-cutting theme concerned questions of democracy, justice and ethics. Researchers in global environmental governance have frequently discussed these issues with a view to the distribution of responsibilities for bringing about solutions to environmental challenges. Within the global climate change regime, but also in other areas, the norm of “shared but differentiated responsibilities,” for instance, has become an important benchmark. Moreover, with the inclusion of actors beyond the (democratic) state into institutions of environmental governance, questions about democratic accountability, transparency and legitimacy have been raised. With this in mind, participants were encouraged to discuss what (and whose) definition of environmental justice and accountability could be applied at the regional level, whether or not the regional level is suited to provide for equitable solutions to environmental challenges, and what implications for democratic legitimacy regional approaches entail. Special attention was also paid to the involvement (and the representativeness) of local actors, non-governmental organizations, and other groups for whom regions are the locus of collective action and whose motives include the development of regional and environmental identities.

4. Workshop structure and the proceedings

The REGov organization evolved around four distinct but linked blocks. The first block entailed keynote presentations by Roderick Neumann, a geographer from Florida International University, and Stacy D. VanDeveer, a political scientist from the University of New Hampshire, who delineated the topic of regional environmental governance and situated it in the context of their work. The second block consisted of “thematic panels” (TP) that brought together topical reflections of scholars from different disciplines and practitioners. These thematic panels correspond to the major themes outlined above. The third block evolved around “open panels” organized on the basis of the more traditional conference model (presentation and discussion of a research article). The fourth block involved a pluridisciplinary synthesis provided by Bernard Debarbieux (geographer’s perspective), Greg Greenwood (natural scientific perspective), and Jörg Balsiger (political science perspective).

The structure of this volume of proceedings largely follows the four blocks above. Table 1 summarizes the contributions; contributions not included in this volume are available at <http://reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.

Table 1: REGov contributions contained in this volume

Workshop block	Contributors
TP 1: What is a region?	Anssi Paasi, Ronan Uhel
TP 2: Environmental regions in multilevel governance	Liliana Andonova & Stacy VanDeveer, Olivier Graefe
TP 3: Regional security and the environment	Richard Matthew, Saleem Ali, Benedikt Korf
TP 4: Regional economic dynamics and the environment	Henrik Selin
TP 5: New environmental regionalization/regionalism	William Jackson, Jörg Balsiger, Frédéric Giraut
TP 6: Environmental regionalization, democracy, and civil society	Nicolas Evrard, Lorraine Elliott, Andreas Klinke
Synthesis	Greg Greenwood
Open panels	Eva Lieberherr, Ieva Kapaciauskaite, Roland Scherer & Kristina Zumbusch, Cristina Del Biaggio, Sundar Kumar Sharma, Stefan Marzelli, Neil Craik, Jörn Harfst & Peter Wirth, Marco Pütz, Frances Drake, Norman Backhaus

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express their gratitude for funding provided by the Swiss Network for International Studies, Swiss National Science Foundation, University of Geneva School of Social Sciences and Economics, Swiss Federal

Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, and Mountain Research Initiative. The authors also wish to thank their colleagues on the REGov organizing committee – Liliana Andonova (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies Geneva), Juliet Fall (University of Geneva), Andreas Klinke (Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology), Miriam Prys (German Institute of Global and Regional Studies), and Stacy VanDeveer (University of New Hampshire) – as well as Cristina Del Biaggio, Dusan Djordjevic, Simon Gaberell, and Raphaël Pieroni, David Pillonel, Gaël Riondel (all from the University of Geneva) for their assistance in organizing the workshop.

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