

Oberthür, Sebastian and Olav Schram Stokke (eds.) (2011), *Managing Institutional Complexity: Regime Interplay and Global Environmental Change*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

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With the steady increase of the number of international treaties, estimated at more than 55,000 in 1997, including some 900 multilateral agreements on environmental matters, the issues of fragmentation, overlap and potential conflict between international regimes are drawing increased attention. In particular, the un-coordinated development of international policy, within and between areas, has given rise to concerns about the effectiveness of these international efforts, notably with regard to environmental issues.

This book, one of the outcomes of Institutional Dimensions of Global Environmental Change (IDGEC) project, aims to “advance our understanding of interinstitutional influence and its consequences” by focusing on two main questions: “[...] how states and other actors, individually and collectively, go about improving interinstitutional synergy or avoiding disruption, and what factors condition their success”, referred to as *interplay management*, and “[...] what forces drive the emergence and change of so-called *institutional complexes*—complex interaction situations in which two or more international institutions interact to cogovern issue areas in international relations.” The book aims to enhance understanding of these matters by putting forward theoretical concepts and ideas and by including studies on instances and aspects of interplay management and institutional complexes.

In the Introduction, the editors lay the conceptual foundations for the book by introducing and clarifying the concepts of international institutions, institutional interaction, interplay management, and institutional complexes. This clarification is helpful in that it helps to distinguish between a variety of phenomena that can and have become foci for research, such as the ways international regimes impact on each other, efforts aimed at the management of these impacts, and the emergence of interlocking governance structures.

The second chapter (by Oberthür and Gehring) provides an overview of the ‘state of the art’ of the research on institutional interaction. Some of the findings the authors derive from a range of empirical studies provide the tentative starting points for the formulation of ideas (if not hypotheses) regarding causal mechanisms that influence the extent of conflict or synergy between agreements and regimes, such as the role and power of knowledge and ideas, issues associated with overlapping membership, and interactions at the impact level. The authors put forward a set of ‘key’ research questions, based on two variables (the level of analysis and the unit of analysis), to guide research in this area. Arguably the most significant contention coming out of this review is that, in many cases, institutional interaction is of a synergistic rather than a conflicting nature. This statement may surprise many analysts, especially those who study the relations between the international trade regime and a range of environmental agreements, and needs indeed to be qualified, as becomes apparent in following chapters.

The following nine chapters offer a range of case studies on institutional interaction focusing on particular aspects or issues, such as climate governance, the interaction between the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols, Arctic environmental governance, regimes affecting plant genetic resources (and the role of expert networks), trade and the environment, fisheries management, and 'interplay management' between the climate, energy and development regimes. The chapters are informative and well-researched, and often shed some new light on the way regimes function and have evolved in a broader context, both within the environmental realm and the non-environmental (notably trade) realm of regimes (notably with regard to trade). Almost inevitably, there is some overlap and repetition in the discussion between various chapters, but not to the extent that it becomes irritating, as each chapter brings a different angle to the interpretation of the interactions.

A concluding chapter from the editors draws together the main findings of these studies. The first is that decentralised interplay management is dominant in global environmental governance. In most cases where regimes affect each other, the issues are addressed (not necessarily resolved), separately by actors within the regimes involved, not by co-ordinated action at a higher level. Although not referred to by the authors, what comes to mind here is Wildvasky's notion of co-ordination by 'mutual adjustment', a process of mutual adaptation based on what the separate actors perceive as optimal decisions and actions in the context of external constraints, including the actions of others. This finding is far from surprising, as international institutional interplay management operates in a context in which there is no central authority, and no formal hierarchy between regimes. The second main finding is that where regimes interact or overlap in the same issue area, a kind of 'division of labour' between the regimes evolves, creating relatively stable 'institutional complexes' within which actors come to accept each others' roles and responsibilities. An example of this can be found, according to the authors, in the relationship that has evolved between the WTO and a range of Multilateral Environmental Agreements, which can be seen as a relative success for the latter in the sense that the regulation of various forms of trade for environmental reasons has come to be accepted by the WTO.

What insights does the book offer with regard to advancement of effective international and global environmental management? The authors themselves admit that the findings indicate that, with respect to environmental effectiveness and achievement, at best, the 'glass is still only half full' (321), and that the status quo bias of institutional complexes is problematic if one is of the view that more fundamental institutional change is required to achieve environmental objectives. But although the book offers many insights into the complexities of interplay management it offers little in the way of ideas or guidance on how such change can be brought about. On the contrary, the editors draw the conclusion that the findings 'do not bode well for proposals for a World Environment Organization' (337), and the agenda they put forward, mainly for undertaking further research, appears to suggest that another old public policy favourite, 'muddling through' (Lindblom) is all that we can expect and hope for.

The key issue underlying the twin challenges of creating greater coherence between the growing number of international institutions, and of their 'greening', as acknowledged in the conclusion, is the relative power and interests of the actors involved. Big states and economic (including trade) interests largely determine the conditions for and limitations to the greening of global institutions. Yet, these political-economic factors and impediments,

especially those of a structural nature, receive little attention in this book (although the chapter by Fariborz Zelli discusses the importance of 'power structure', the connection with economic interests is not made). Thus, although this book is essential reading for those who are interested in the complexities and intricacies of the management of international and global institutional management from a pragmatic point of view, it will not satisfy those who seek to explain or address these issues at a deeper/structural level.