



Designing institutions for governing planetary boundaries – Lessons from global forest governance

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ABSTRACT

The risk of interacting planetary boundaries highlights the challenge for contemporary institutional structures. This article shines light on the need to better understand how regime complexes manage overlaps. In developing this understanding, the article explores overlaps and coordination in the forest regime complex. By examining the work of an informal high level agency, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, the article investigates how coordination in a dense regime complex could be achieved. In pursuing this analysis, the article draws lessons for how to manage increasingly complex problems that interacting planetary boundaries could give rise to. The article draws on the literatures of institutional interplay and institutional design in order to understand the more subtle forms of institutional decision-making. The article shows that there are many overlaps among international institutions with forest related mandate, and identifies the innovative mechanism as important in managing these linkages, although it does not take part in actual decision-making. In sum, the article's findings suggest that carefully designed mechanisms might be one way to, if not to overcome, at least to facilitate the institutional response of governance challenges in the complex setting of planetary boundaries.

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1. Introduction

There is a great need for international problem solving that can meet the challenge to find cooperative policy solutions for problems that cross functional, geographical and political boundaries. Today, there is a plethora of international institutions that attempt to meet this need. Yet experience shows, and studies suggest, that existing international institutions have a mixed problem solving capacity in many areas of international politics; the failed efforts to develop a post-Kyoto agreement is just one of the most recent examples. The notion of “planetary boundaries” further stresses the shortcomings of international institutions. By quantifying boundaries for nine Earth subsystems, Rockström et al. (2009a, 2009b) illustrate the critical threshold for a safe operating space for humanity.

Due to the multilevel and cross-sectoral implications of planetary boundaries, they are likely to affect and be affected by decisions taken by a number of different institutions. Thus, planetary boundaries are

difficult to match institutionally. Although the implications of multiple and interacting Earth processes are difficult to project, they cause concern of the capacity of existing institutions and give rise to calls for “better-designed institutions” (Walker et al., 2009: 1345). However, before planning for institutional reform, there is a need to delve deeply into existing knowledge on current institutions and decision-making processes.

To understand the difficulties facing governance systems in light of interacting planetary boundaries, we must first understand the properties of existing governance structures, also the less well-studied aspects of current systems. What strategies are there for institutions to adapt to complex and coupled issues? One crucial part of such venture is to comprehend linkages between institutions and how to manage these linkages. Yet another crucial part is to improve upon existing knowledge on what features is required of institutions in order for them to be able to deal with these challenges, i.e. what would be an optimal design for capable institutions. These concerns are important, but of a quite general character. In order to be able to employ a serious assessment on possibilities and difficulties of current institutional structures, this article explores how coordination has taken place within one specific issue area of environmental governance: the forest regime complex.

Forests play a vital part in land change and biodiversity loss, which also are two among the nine processes for which Rockström et al. (2009a, 2009b: 473) have defined planetary boundaries. According to their research, humanity is seen as approaching the boundaries for land use change, while loss of biodiversity already has been

Abbreviations: UNCED, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; UNFCCC, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; UNFF, United Nations Forum on Forests; CBD, Convention on Biological Diversity; UNCCD, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification; REDD, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation of Forests; ITTF, Interagency Task Force on Forests; CPF, Collaborative Partnership on Forests.

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transgressed. These processes are intimately linked to deforestation and forest degradation. The problems of deforestation and forest degradation relate directly to planetary boundaries. Forests have been difficult to “fit” institutionally, and in addition forests interact with several other issue areas. For example, there is no forest regime, despite many years of international efforts to create one. The result is a fragmented institutional landscape with diverse goals regarding the management of forests (Humphreys, 2006; see also Dimitrov, 2006). In addition, the world's forests are receiving more international attention than ever. Forests' importance in climate change negotiations and recent discussions on a REDD mechanism (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation of Forests) surely highlight the immediate interest. But forest issues will also become even more critical in light of growing demands of biofuel and land for agriculture (Bass and Mayers, 2008).

Forest issues offer an important and illustrative example in this context by demonstrating how interactions among forest related institutions have been managed. By examining the work of the informal high level agency, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), the article explores how coordination in a dense regime complex could be pursued. In conducting this analysis, the article seeks to draw important lessons for how to manage increasingly complex problems that interacting planetary boundaries could give rise to. In addition, it could increase the knowledge on less researched aspects of international institutions, such as the role of institutional mechanisms in larger institutional settings. The article draws on the literatures of institutional interplay and institutional design to understand the more subtle forms of institutional decision-making. Forest governance is a well-researched field and the article builds on earlier scholarship. However, there are surprisingly little work done on the CPF and this article makes some initial findings based on documentary material as empirical evidence.

The article begins by introducing the literature on interplay and design as a way to underpin the understanding of the research problem. The subsequent section briefly outlines the forest problematique and the forest governance area. As the focus of this article is on how interplay could be managed, the article does not provide a thorough survey of forest institutions. Instead it focuses on one particular agency in this field, the CPF, which is sketched out in the following section. The next section demonstrates how interplay and interplay management play out in the forest regime complex. In this section the relationship between fit, interplay and design is elaborated on and the CPF is analysed supported by these elaborations. The last sections conclude by drawing lessons for planetary boundaries from this case and summarize the article's main findings.

2. Transformation of International Decision-making

Traditionally, environmental problems were addressed as distinct and separable problems, compartmentalized within different treaties (Andonova and Mitchell, 2010: 271). Congruent with the understanding of separable problems, the study of international environmental politics has focused on specific issues in isolation from others, often utilizing regime analysis. Regime analysis further emphasizes the issue specific: “regimes are created to respond to the demand for governance in a specific issue area” (Young and Zürn, 2006: 121). Regime analysis has contributed to increase the understanding of dynamics and effectiveness of the institutional response to different environmental problems, such as climate change and ozone depletion (see e.g. Andresen, 2000; Benedick, 1991; Haas, 1990; Sjöstedt, 1998).

However, international cooperation in general has increasingly become more institutionalized over the past decades. Indeed,

international institutions¹ constitute a central feature of international politics and “remain the major sites of global governance” (Higgott, 2008: 612). Today, international decision-making is characterized by nested, overlapping and parallel institutions (Alter and Meunier, 2009). The combination of density of institutions and complexity of issues makes it difficult to understand and act within single institutions, as Alter and Meunier (2009: 14) put it: “we can study the dynamics of the Kyoto Protocol, but doing so will not ultimately help us to understand how global warming gets addressed”.

2.1. Regime Complexes

In response to increased knowledge on complexities and interconnections among issues and the growing density of institutions, scholars from different theoretical schools have begun to address the institutional context of single institutions in terms of: the broader institutional environment (Hofmann, 2011); regime complex or regime complexity (Alter and Meunier, 2009; Keohane and Victor, 2010); and institutional architecture (Biermann et al., 2010). Following Raustalia and Victor (2004: 279), a regime complex is defined as “An array of partially overlapping and non-hierarchical institutions governing a particular issue area. Regime complexes are marked by the existence of several legal agreements that are created and maintained in distinct fora with participation of different sets of actors”. Regime complexes highlight the phenomena of institutional fit, which is important to understand the connection between the institution and the problem it is created to solve or mitigate. Young and Underdal (1997) define the problem of fit as: “The problem of fit asserts that the effectiveness and the robustness of social institutions are functions of the fit between the institutions themselves and the biophysical and social domains in which they operate”.

2.2. Institutional Overlap

Focus on linkages has become a prominent research area, often referred to as institutional interaction, interplay or overlap.² Broadly defined, interplay refers to the phenomenon where one institution, intentionally or unintentionally, affects another (King, 1997). The effectiveness of an institution does not only depend on its own performance, but also on its interactions with other arrangements that have overlapping jurisdictions (Young, 1999: 49). Thus, an institution's effectiveness depends on the interactions with other institutions and how responsive the institution is to the problem it is set up to solve.

Efforts to comprehend and map out interlinkages and overlaps have led to an understanding of how issue-specific regimes interact and what consequences there are (see e.g. Oberthür and Gehring, 2006). Most such studies focus on aspects of different regimes and identify overlaps and interactions on specific programme elements or agenda items (see e.g. Rosendal, 2001). In further developing the understanding of interplay, there is a growing interest in how the linkages are managed. Interplay management has been defined as “deliberate efforts by participant in tributary or recipient regimes to prevent, encourage, or shape the way one regime affects problem

¹ The term ‘international institution’ refers to a wide range of phenomena. The term has gradually been broadened and grown to include all forms of institutionalized cooperation at the international level (Jönsson and Tallberg, 2008). The broader view of institutions that have grown more common includes organisations and sets of rules, codified in conventions and protocols that have been formally accepted by states (Young, 1989: 32). Thus, the distinction between ‘institution’ and ‘organization’ are not always upheld and the usage of the first term is more frequent. Here, we proceed from a broad rather than a narrow understanding of institutions and see institutions as sets of international regulations and organisations (Keohane, 1984).

² The terms interaction, overlap and interplay are applied interchangeable in this article.

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