

GLOBALIZING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: A CASE OF DILUTING THE PROBLEM?

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing trend to consider many environmental issues as global in scale. This may be as a result of over-emphasising the significance of the problem, either because of a genuine belief in the case or possibly for self-serving reasons. But whatever the reason, with the growing size and connectivity of communities across the world, human impacts on the environment, (and vice versa), are increasingly framed in global terms. With this situation comes the perception that solutions must be similarly based upon a global perspective, and any action at less than this scale would be rendered as ineffectual. However this stultifying effect can be negated by couching the problem within a more regional setting. Using this approach, impacts are seen to be more immediate while mutually acceptable targets become achievable and regionally negotiated action plans become based upon local trust and knowledge allied with shared practices and cultural norms. To achieve this, a more responsible, balanced approach to discussing environmental matters is needed and a regional environmental authority that is capable of operating across international borders.

INTRODUCTION

In the world of global media, accessed through distributed printing outlets or using the internet, it is now possible to obtain huge amounts of information. There is the ability to view situations or conditions on the other side of the world in near real time; whether economic, social or environmental. Additionally, organizations with certain agendas can push information out to a global audience, usually through targeted recipients or through mass media devices such as radio and television. So, not only can we seek specific information on a global scale, we are also on the receiving end of a seemingly never-ending flow of publicity material from sources around the world pushing their own particular messages.

As the amount of information being broadcast and received continues to grow it becomes more and more difficult for any single 'voice' to be heard. One way of raising the profile of any message is to promote its importance. For the purpose of this paper we consider 'the message' to be in the form of a warning of impending risk to our environment or our way of life. This self-promotional approach is justified by the fact that if more people feel they are at risk from particular events or processes then more people will take notice. As such, an increasing number of socio-environmental issues are now considered to be acting on a global scale, e.g. natural habitat destruction, aging populations and transboundary migration of people, (environmental refugees), or diseases. One of the unfortunate side effects of this is that there is a natural inclination to look afar for solutions and assume, (or hope), that someone, somewhere, 'is doing something about it'. The scale of the problem can lead to a fatalistic approach that can reduce any actions as to seem negligible. This applies not only in terms of direct actions but also in terms of shaping political will to meet agreements such that all parties benefit. Currently there are 192 member states of the United Nations and as anyone knows, trying to get 20 individuals to agree about something is difficult, but to obtain assent from 192 requires a great deal of diplomatic wrangling.

So, the question is, “Is there a better way of addressing important environmental issues than simply using the global scale?” Perhaps the tag ‘global’ carries with it a level of involvement that is far removed from, not only the individual, but also from larger concerned parties and organizations. Certainly the scale and impacts of human behaviour on our environment have a history of increasing in size, so it appears inevitable that the number of threats that are considered ‘global’ can only increase in the future.

GROWING SCALES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

From the origins of early trade, there has been the movement of goods and ideas, and as the networks expanded so did the amount of information that flowed. Part of the development and mixing of cultures and societies over the ages has been the enablement of people to share information, knowledge and wisdom on an increasingly larger scale. Included in this spread of knowledge has been the information, both practical and technical, on how communities can develop and operate without causing irreparable damage to their surrounding environment. The application of this knowledge and subsequent behaviour separated the semi-nomadic pastoral societies from the more permanent agricultural settlers. The ideas of intensive farming, crop rotation, irrigation and animal husbandry all allowed for more efficient use of resources. However, as population increases continued, so the pressure on surrounding natural resources and environments also increased, to some extents where the communities were no longer viable, (e.g. Easter Island, Sahel, US Dust Bowl).

It would be naïve for us to consider that in the past we were unaware that our behaviour was acting in isolation from our surroundings. Trees were felled to clear land for farming purposes leading to shortages of wood for fuel. Ideas of crop rotation, seasonal grazing and other ways by which human impact could be reduced would have been practiced to allow stable communities to develop and grow. However, with the growth in size of these communities the spread of their impacts would also increase sufficiently that the very presence of the community would be put at risk. Despite the obvious problems associated with local environmental pollution it required laws and, perhaps more importantly, law enforcement to modify human behaviour. Newson, (1992), details the development of legislation required in the UK to restrict the amount of water pollution, particularly downstream of urban areas. Statutory laws were put in place, starting in 1388 and include laws preserving the River Thames, (1535), a Public Health Act, (1848) and common rights to water in ‘natural state in flow, quantity and quality’, (1859). The idea behind the enacting of these laws was to protect the population in general from the actions of the polluters, generally from businesses, but also from the general population themselves.

Another example of how detrimental anthropogenic behaviour produces action to counteract the impacts comes from the use of coal-fired heating in London during December of 1952. During a five day period that coincided with cold temperatures and the development of an inversion layer, trapping the resultant soot, some four thousand people died of respiratory illness in the following weeks. During the weeks following these initial deaths a further eight thousand deaths were also blamed on the Great Smog of 1952, although there is some evidence to suppose that a small minority of these deaths were caused by an influenza outbreak, (Bell *et al*, 2004). To counteract the likelihood of this event being repeated a Clean Air Act was passed by Parliament in 1956 to reduce emissions by eliminating the use of high-sulphur coal for home heating.

The origin of the environmental movement and concern with these issues within the western hemisphere is often identified by the publication of *Silent Spring*, (Carson, 1962), which pointed to links between the use of pesticides, specifically DDT, on crops and the reduction in bird numbers. As such it was one of the first articles that reached a mass

audience highlighting that human impacts on the natural environment are not always simple to perceive. It triggered the idea that the effects of human interaction with the environment can trigger unforeseen reactions some distance from the source through a series of unknown and uncertain connections.

Expanding from this came the concept that these connections could spread across the entire globe, giving birth to the original ideas that the globe behaves as a single entity, with the Gaia Hypothesis, (Lovelock, 1979) perhaps being the principal example. From this standpoint has sprung a number of 'problems', largely considered of human making that are seen to act on a more or less global scale. Such issues include climate change, intensification of land use, increasing desertification, coastal erosion and depletion of natural resources; amongst them non-renewable energy, forestry and marine resources.

Historically environmental problems are seen as covering an increasingly larger area and require comprehensive coordinated actions, so it is logical that globally impacting issues will need global solutions. In other words, solutions to these perceived global problems are also seen as global in scale. For example we are encouraged to "think globally, act locally" to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases being introduced into the atmosphere. The solution to decreasing ozone levels, particularly evident in the higher latitudes, was to globally eliminate the production and use of halons, chlorofluorocarbons and other ozone-depleting substances under the Montreal Protocol of 1987, (with later amendments). Eventually ratified by 191 countries, this is the first and probably only example of successful global cooperation on an environmental issue.

THE 'GLOBAL PROBLEMS REQUIRES GLOBAL SOLUTIONS' FALLACY

Rambo, (1997), encapsulated the idea that global action is generally not forthcoming when addressing the pressures on the environment due to increasing needs for food, energy and goods. He notes that there is continuing trend of greater pollution of the atmosphere, further loss of biodiversity and degradation of agricultural land and advocates a more localized action strategy rather than assume global legislation would suffice. While the direct causes may be many, the two major drivers of this increasing pressure can be seen as growth in both population and economies. In terms of numbers of people inhabiting this earth it took 123 years, (1804-1927), to increase global population from one billion to two billion, whereas it took only twelve years, (1987-1999), to increase from five billion to six billion, although this rate of growth is slowly being reduced, (UN, 2000). Economic growth uses up more energy and resources as living styles, ranging from housing and diet through to transport and leisure activities, change as societies become more affluent. Arguably, in this new century economic pressures will begin to dominate our understanding of sustainable development as population pressures start to diminish. However, whichever of these pressures have the greatest impact, both of them operate on local and regional, rather than global, scales.

There is no globally consistent way of dealing with complex issues that require coordinated actions. The difficulties are inherent as there exists no accepted global society that has single belief systems, social norms and hierarchies, ideas of fairness and behavioural practices. Veak and Galusky (1999) acknowledge that the ideals of single global actions are sound but the practicalities are flawed, addressing the issue from an ethical viewpoint. These imposed solutions, usually based upon a western-style view of how the earth operates, can be seen as at best a top-down approach or at worst a form of cultural imperialism, (albeit with a benign message). Quite often these solutions are eyed with a good deal of suspicion by the parties outside of the mainstream, decision-making bodies.

So, should the focus be more on a regional scale, where there may already be a degree of cooperation on certain issues? Usually this would be considered to include more than one nation as the issues discussed here are not generally confined within politically defined boundaries. International cooperation between neighbours should be seen as more likely to achieve mutually-agreeable objectives than globally driven edicts. Additionally, the growth in numbers of NGO's and stakeholders, and the acknowledgement that they should be included in any decision-making process, exacerbates the ability to create worldwide solutions from a single perspective.

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The work of global bodies, (e.g. Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations Environment Program and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), manages to aggregate and synthesise information from all corners of the world to highlight particular issues that are deemed of global significance. As such they are extremely successful and can deliver messages of warning with a great deal of authority. However, the ability to then formulate actions has been somewhat less than successful. Various approaches have been made, from the vision of an idealized concerned citizen, denounced by Hardin, (1967) in his *Tragedy of the Commons*, through market forces regulating resources, dismissed by Mansfield, (2005), to the idea that certain actions enacted now will lead to economic savings in the long term, (Stern, 2007).

Indeed, a comprehensive study of global environmental change, ESRC Global Environmental Change Programme, (2000), poses the question, "Who governs the global environment?" Following a ten-year study the report asks, but fails to properly answer, a number of relevant questions, although they do acknowledge that "examples of regional environmental regimes and local adaptation to environmental change suggest that the global is not always the best level for action." When considering whether international environmental regimes work, one point of view is that governments will always follow an agenda that is self-serving; another *Tragedy of the Commons*, (Hardin, 1967), but this time at an international, rather than individual, level. Another precept expresses the idea that, although the impacts are often studied on a social or political basis the limits of impacts cross these boundaries and are better defined by geographical and more specifically topographic features, e.g. drainage basins, common coastal frontages, etc. As such these common regional topographic units would find they have more in common than other areas within the same political boundaries.

A Regional Environmental Forum for Mainland Southeast Asia held in 2002, (REF-MSEA, 2003) entitled *Advancement of Environmental Governance* highlights three accepted norms for sustainable development; (a) the emergence of international norms of environmental governance, (b) the need for trans-boundary cooperation and (c) free public access to information and decision-making. Whilst this initial forum involved only the six Mekong countries, (Burma, Cambodia, China's Yunnan Province, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam), there were statements made in a subsequent meeting, REF-MSEA (2004), that the forum could be opened up to the entire ASEAN region and should broaden its scope to deal with a wider range of environmental problems and concerns.

In a very similar vein Badenoch, (2002), explores the requisites for governing the environmental requirements across national borders. Once again the Mekong Delta is used as one example but he also includes the need for regulation when utilising forestry resources. He focuses on existing regional institutions, namely the Asian Development Bank, the Mekong River Commission and ASEAN and points out that none of these have a full remit to engage stakeholders at all levels, from the local, (e.g. individuals or groups), to the international, (NGO's), especially on environmental matters. He goes on to discuss

the need for institutional structures for environmental governance, both at the local and the regional or transboundary level, stressing the need for flexibility in their approach and an ability to work with multiple, and sometimes competing, interests.

What then for the future? If we consider issues that are deemed as global in nature should we resist the inclination to look for a single 'one size fits all' solution and instead look for regional agreements and collaborations? Possibly shared visions are better agreed upon when stakeholders share similar social and cultural values. Additionally, any past cooperation between nations and regions builds links between relevant agencies and hopefully leads to a degree of trust for future negotiations. In most peoples minds the leading example of an issue requiring global action is the need to reduce carbon dioxide outputs. Instead of asking for cuts in global terms, (for example the Kyoto Protocol agreed to 5 percent reduction from 1990 levels by 2012 for all developed countries), the idea of regional targets could be proposed with allocations being made based upon regional emissions. From this position a more equitable distribution of cuts, based upon regional knowledge and expertise, could be made.

So, would these ideas fit well within the ASEAN perspective? Although originally created in 1967 as an organization based upon common political and economic concerns and to promote regional cooperation, its role has grown to include social and cultural development within the region. Could this role be expanded to include regional environmental concerns? In 1990 the Kuala Lumpur Accord on Environment and Development asked for, amongst other things, efforts to prevent transboundary pollution. The highest profile specific environmental accord so far has been the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze, (ASEAN, 2002) to "prevent and monitor transboundary haze pollution as a result of land and/or forest fires". According to Tan, (2005), the source of the majority of pollution, namely Indonesia, for a variety of reasons has not yet ratified this agreement. A major drawback with the ASEAN organisation is that, due to the variation in political systems there is no ability to censure states, or attempt to meddle in the affairs of states, that fail to meet with any agreements; all decisions are consensually-based.

Can ten countries, already ostensibly united by a number of agreements, both economic and environmental, be able to live up to their promises? Tan's (2005) rather damning indictment suggests that they has some way to go, and the only authority that ASEAN has over its member states is a form of moral authority based on an expectation of behaviour. From previous experience of addressing environmental issues across national boundaries, (e.g. haze events and flooding), local and regional considerations, partnerships and collaborations have already been built up. However these are probably based more on an ad hoc basis than any coordinated region-wide policy. Could permanent agencies be set up on an ASEAN-wide basis to address issues both within its borders and commit to action on global levels? If we perceive the regional players as a "family" of nations, then like all family matters, there may be differences but hopefully they can be reconciled for the greater good of all. But with this approach must also be the concept of penalties for non-compliance of agreed practices, much like in the European Union, where fines can be levied for failing to reach agreed standards of, for example, water or air quality. Penalties need not be financial but definitely punitive in some sense. In this sense ASEAN will have to become more authoritative which will naturally be accompanied by nations concerned with loss of state power. If future plans for closer economic ties are to be successful in this region, for example the Open Sky policy or the objective of a single currency, then more stringent and rigorous implementation rules will be required. Should this occur then the ability to legislate for transboundary environmental concerns will become less problematic.

CONCLUSION

As the influence of our presence on the world's natural systems are being felt on increasingly larger scales there is a natural tendency to view these issues on a larger scale. As the scales increase in size up to global proportions, (either real or imagined), so the idea arises that these issues should be addressed at the world-wide level. The outcome from this is that the concern at the local level is reduced and weakens our determination to take any alleviating action. A more balanced, responsible approach by scientists and publishers, particularly in the mass media market, is needed to reduce the public perception that only at the global level can appropriate action to be taken.

Additionally there is a growing acceptance that coordinated global action to address environmental issues is difficult to achieve. This is due to the wide variety of logistical, administrative, ethnic or economic differences across the world. The sheer diversity of cultures and societies, both within and across national borders preclude the implementation of simple, broad, all-embracing solutions meeting with any success. Agreements and coordination of actions are better achieved by examining and addressing problems from a more regional setting, even when the issue is global in scope. However, within these regional groupings it must be recognized that there are local differences that must be acknowledged. What is also required is the ability, at the regional level, to develop bodies or agencies that can act as focal points for both initiating action plans and also recognising the concerns of stakeholders.

Currently the ASEAN model does not meet the requirements needed to be able to create the type of agency with sufficient authority to take necessary actions to combat large scale environmental problems. Such an agency needs the ability, through invested powers, to overrule national priorities; powers that will have to be ceded by the member states. Unlike the EU, where environmental directives can be handed out that supercede any national authority, there is no such agency in the ASEAN organisation that can act in such a manner. There is some movement within this region towards such a goal with discussions taking place for a new charter that includes the setting up of a human rights commission, sanctions against member states that do not follow rules and issue settlements by votes rather than consensus. However, given the rate at which most political procedures take place it will be a long protracted process before this comes into existence.

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