

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND REGIONALISM: OPPORTUNITY OR CHALLENGE?

Christian Ploberger

Texto entregue em Novembro de 2021

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE REFERS TO A FORM of governance, rules and regulations at a particular level. When considering the global level, with the huge number of actors involved, and with civil society being capable of generating political influence on governments, fragmentation becomes a critical issue for global governance. Adding to this challenge is regionalism, the cooperation of a limited number of states within a specific geographic setting. However, one may argue that regional organisations and agreements reached at the regional level may offer support for global governance strategies, thereby transforming the regional image associated with fragmentation to one of support. Yet it is part of an ongoing debate as to what extent regionalism either contributes to or undermines global governance strategies. To illustrate this challenge, the topic of climate change will be applied. To begin with, a short evaluation of what global governance stands for is offered.

Global Governance

Weiss and Wilkinson (2018) describe global governance as the sum of informal and formal ideas, values, norms, procedures and institutions that help all actors identify, understand and address trans-boundary problems. However, it needs to be clarified from the outset that global governance does not refer to a global government, as no formalised hierarchical order exists in international politics. It is worth remembering that it is only states that have the ability to make binding international decisions, even though state authority has come under increasing pressure. This is not to argue that civil society cannot influence governments. As for global governance, it tries to address specific cross-border issues that individual countries cannot address on their own. It does so by formulating new guidelines and rules or by strengthening existing ones. Operating at the global level indicates a critical challenge for global governance, as it has to integrate numerous concerns of a plethora of different actors. In doing so, global governance rules and guidelines often get watered down and may lead to a failure of providing an effective and timely response. While global governance focuses on the global level to address the challenges humanity faces, global challenges generate specific local impacts. Climate change provides a good example. For this reason, we need to make a closer evaluation of the regional level.

Regionalism

When references are made to the regional level, they focus on either regional organisations

like the EU, ASEAN, or Mercosur or selected geographic spaces like Central Asia, South-east Asia or Central America, to offer some examples. Within such regional settings, we are often able to identify even smaller yet still integrated spaces, identified as sub-regions, commonly based on some geographic features, like an international river basin (e.g., the Danube or Mekong region), or coastal areas (Baltic States, Black Sea countries). Whereas regional cooperation is often based on state-level cooperation, sub-regional cooperation is based on loose cooperation below the national level, inspired by local concerns. The region, as a specific form of political cooperation, takes on a specific relevance for addressing global challenges and for global governance. Therefore, the relationship between global governance and the region requires some attention.

Opportunity or Challenge

As stated above, global challenges do not create a uniform impact, but rather region-specific impacts, thus enhancing the relevance of the regional level as a focus for analysis. Regions are inclined to be the focus when it comes to addressing various challenges. This emphasis on finding a solution at the regional level can lead to what Biermann et al. (2009) describe as fragmentation of global governance, of undermining global policy goals and global strategies. While this may be seen as appropriate from a particular regional perspective, such region-specific responses, as necessary as they may be, can provide a challenge for global governance.

“ The region level (f. e. EU, ASEAN, MERCOSUR, ECOWAS) as a specific form of political cooperation has an increasing relevance in addressing Climate Change. ”

Another related topic is that regional organisations differ in their ability to implement global governance strategies, even when there is an agreement to adhere to global governance strategies. One merely has to compare the ability of the EU to implement regulations with that of ASEAN. While in the first case, based on the strong internal coherence, strict implementation

can be almost guaranteed, the situation is rather different in the second case, since ASEAN opted for less internal coherence. Because of this asymmetry in regional institutional setting, attempts at a uniform implementation of global governance strategies and agreed policies will encounter additional challenges. This is not to say that the regional level cannot be of support to global governance. Acharya (2018), for example, points to this perceived ambiguity of the regional level for global governance, when explaining that some scholars and policymakers see regionalism as a recipe for global fragmentation and chaos, while others take a more positive view of regionalism and advocate a more regionalized approach to global order-building.

Yet the focus on the region can be related to the proliferation of actors at different levels, which leads to a more pluralistic world, which in turn add further dynamics to the fragmentation of global governance strategies. Even so, one could argue that getting more actors to agree on a global governance strategy is a positive outlook; indeed, it may be the case when it comes to implementation of any agreed global strategy, by providing more support for it. Such considerations are related to another crucial aspect of global governance: the number of actors involved in a policy strategy. After all, a policy strategy covering a large membership will face a widely diverse set of interests, which may extend the process to find an agreement on a global governance policy and may even weaken the context of the final global policy strategy. Alternatively, one could aim for a limited membership to strengthen commitment to address a particular target, as well as to speed up the negotiation process. However, Biermann et al. (2009) remind us that it is doubtful whether reaching an agreement with a small membership would improve the overall performance in addressing a global challenge, as this may only lead to a solution that fits the interests of the participating members and perhaps cannot be applied to an extended membership, thus undermining the overall ambitions. Even so, while a plurality of actors presents a challenge for global governance, a more pluralistic world does indicate the inclusion of different voices and actors, which may therefore increase the acceptance and legitimacy of specific rules and strategies agreed on. However, a related and open-ended question is whether there can be unity within plurality. Let us now investigate a serious issue for global governance – climate change – and the related implications.

Climate Change and Global Governance

Climate change offers a fitting example for a global governance topic, as well as the chal-



allenges associate with regionalism. Because climate change represents a global threat, a single country cannot address it on its own. It also offers a primary example of the potential shortcomings of global governance policy strategies, as its impact is always regional and local specific. The recently published UN Emission Gap report (2021) points to a scenario in which we are missing the emission targets to reduce global warming to 1.5° Celsius consequently, more extreme weather events – like flooding and droughts, wildfires, heat waves and hurricanes – are becoming more regular occurrences. Indeed, reducing the emission gap, and thus slowing the global warming dynamic, requires a concerted effort by all countries. While the GHG reduction efforts of one country are a welcome development, it will not be enough to address the dangers it faces from climate change. This provides a strong argument for finding an agreement at the global level, consequently emphasising a global governance approach. At the same time, we are confronted with a partial failure of global governance agreements, as outlined in the Paris Agreement, as GHG emissions keep increasing.

Missing this target will further contribute to the negative impacts of climate change-related effects at the regional and local level, thus enhancing the social-economic pressure and, by extension, the political pressure to act. Of course, such responses will be specific to regions and localities. Taking the example of sea-level rise, we can identify coastal and urban populations all over the world in danger from rising sea-level. However, urban areas and its populations in South, Southeast and East Asia, face a particular challenge. This in turn requires a regional and local response and adaptation strategies to respond to this challenge. Such responses need to be situation-specific, in that they will contribute to a global governance fragmentation process. The same applies to the other climate change-related threats, like heat waves, floods and droughts. This increases the challenges for global governance strategies, considering that people and communities directly threatened within a specific regional or local setting are more willing to demand and take immediate and stronger action than people and communities who may be less threatened.

At the same time, it is worth recognising that regional or local responses to the impact of climate change may be formulated and implemented faster, as not only are fewer actors involved, but they are already facing the direct impact of the threats caused by climate change. Yet the potential back-draft is that compromises reached among a smaller group of actors within a specific regional setting may not be replicated at the global level, thus further enhancing fragmentation of a global governance strategy. This dilemma is described by

Biermann et al. (2009) as one between selecting either a ‘narrow but deep’ or a ‘broad but shallow’ strategy in addressing global climate change impacts.

Another aspect that needs to be considered in the context of global governance policies and regional impact is that, when addressing the impacts of climate change, two options exist: mitigation and adaptation. While mitigation refers to the reduction of the sources of climate change, adaptation represents the response to the effects of climate change. It should be emphasised that mitigation would be the best option, to prevent climate change from happening in the first place, while adaptation, responding to the actual impact of climate change, only represent the second-best option.

“
Plurality of actors presents a challenge for global governance, but at the same time may support the implementation on agreed strategie.”

Yet, because of mitigation failure, indicated by increasing global GHG emissions, adaptation is rising in relevance, although it does have limitations. For example, in the case of sea-level rise, while some adaptation strategies will address some impacts, continuous sea-level rise will over time outpace adaptation measures in many regional and local settings. Even though mitigation measures would be more suited for global governance strategies, this is not meant to imply that mitigation has no place at the regional and local level; indeed, it has a place, as it may generate additional benefits. One just has to consider the additional positive health impacts the reduction of GHG emissions generates within a regional and local setting. In this context, the regional and local levels offer additional support for a global governance strategy. Regarding adaptation, the impact is rather different, since adaptation, addressing a specific climate change impact, is mostly region-specific and local-specific and therefore not uniform in character, even though it may provide an example for other regions to follow. Therefore, adaptation processes tend to contribute to a process of fragmentation.

Final Observations

We are back to the question as to what extent fragmentation undermines global climate change policy. At the same time, we also have to consider the effectiveness of global governance strategies, as well as the time required to

reach and implement them, an issue especially relevant to climate change. If one considers the time required to reach a climate change agreement at the global level, and then have to witness its partial implementation, like the Paris Agreement, failing to reduce the climate change dynamic, by failing to implement the agreed mitigation efforts on time or only partially, timely regional and local responses do offer an alternative approach. Such a perception is further supported, if one compares the behaviour of national governments with regard to global climate agreements, like that of different U.S. governments – first to join, then to leave, and then join again – with city and regional governments networks, like C40 or ICLEI, which offer a timely and continuous adaptation response to climate change impact as well as contributing to mitigation efforts to stay within the 1.5° Celsius goal efforts.

Still, opinions related to global environmental governance are rather diverse; Biermann (2000) argues in favour of a world environment organization to overcome fragmentation, while Oberthür and Gehring (2005) interpret fragmentation of global environmental policy in a positive light. This represents an ongoing debate over policy strategy, one between diversity and generalisation. Even though regional responses enable timely responses, they are piecemeal and location-specific, thus leading to fragmentation. They may not only undermine necessary policy shifts at the global level but may fall short in offering enough response to restrict the climate change dynamic. As a consequence, we may still have return to global governance for support. ■

References

- Weiss, T. G & Wilkinson R. (2018) From International Organisation to Global Governance. In Weiss, T. G & Wilkinson R. (eds.) (2014). *International Organizations and Global Governance*. New York: Routledge, pp. 3-20.
- Biermann, F. (2000) The Case for a World Environment Organization. *Environment*, 42(9): 22–31.
- Biermann F., Pattberg P., van Asselt H., Zelli F. (2009) The Fragmentation of Global Governance Architectures: A Framework for Analysis. *Global Environmental Politics*, 9 (4): 14–40.
- Acharya, A. (2018). *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oberthür S. & Gehring T. (2005). Reforming International Environmental Governance. An Institutional Perspective for Proposals for a World Environment Organization. In Bierman F. & Bauer S. (eds.) *A World Environment Organization. Solution or Threat for Effective International Environmental Governance?* Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 205–234.