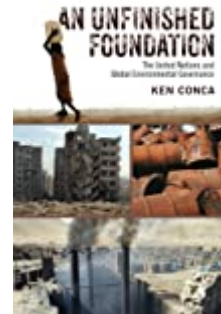


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Ken Conca. *An Unfinished Foundation: The United Nations and Global Environmental Governance.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvi + 301 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-023286-3.



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Published on H-Diplo (March, 2016)

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The dominant narratives of global environmental governance, and in particular of the United Nations's role in that governance, are those of sustainability and of multilateral cooperation. Sustainable development brings an environmental sensibility to one of the UN's core mandates, social progress through development, while multilateral cooperation allows specific international environmental problems to be addressed through another of those core mandates, promoting the rule of law among nations. These narratives result in a pattern of global environmental governance that focuses on development within countries, and law between them. They are so dominant that we think of them as normal and as unremarkable, and of other potential narratives as critical or as outside of the mainstream.

Ken Conca argues that this need not be so. The UN, to judge both from its charter and from its practices since the charter, has four central aspirations. The promotion of development and international law are two of them, but equally important are the promotion of international peace and security, and human rights. In *An Unfinished Foundation* he describes how the environment came to be dealt with at the UN primarily through the development and law mandates, rather than the security and human rights mandates, showing that it was more the re-

sult of institutional politics at the UN than of any particular affinity of environmental governance for the language and mechanisms of law and development rather than those of rights and security.

Conca further argues that the law and development route to global environmental governance is running out of steam, and that even at its most effective is unable to address broad patterns of globalization and consumption that threaten the natural environment. Bringing the security and human rights mandates into environmental governance, and the environment into those mandates, he suggests, will reinvigorate the UN's role. Although he does not quite say it in these terms, Conca is suggesting that the development and international law frames are too state-centric, and are unable to either to address the effects of globalization on the environment, or to get away from the North-South politics that are embedded in the development discourse. What the UN needs, then, is to involve the more people- rather than state-centric discourses of human rights and human security in the politics of global environmental governance.

Before reading the book I was, I must admit, skeptical of the argument. Does the UN's environmental machinery really need to be more complicated? Can the

institutions within it that focus on security and human rights issues, deeply flawed as they are, effectively promote global environmental governance? Is the UN really the place to look to at this point for progress in that governance? But reading *An Unfinished Foundation* convinced me that Conca has a credible case to make. He writes clearly, accessibly, and engagingly, carefully marshaling argument and evidence. His argument is a measured one—that the reforms he is proposing will improve environmental governance, not that they will fix it. Furthermore, he makes it in a way that addresses the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the UN system.

The argument is presented in six chapters. The first one, along with an overview of the project, provides a description of the UN's environmental machinery and how it fits in with the rest of the organization. The second tells the history of how the environment at the UN became an issue of law and development rather than one of security and rights. A key point in this story is the 1960s, a time at which the environmental movement in the global North was growing while the membership of the UN was expanding rapidly as more of the global South became independent. The new members of the UN often saw the environmental movement as a threat to their control over their natural resources. A language of development emphasized the rights of states to such control, against claims by individuals both within and outside of the country. A language of law, meanwhile, reinforced the idea that the rights of states to control their own resources could only be limited with their explicit consent.

The third chapter makes the case for the core argument of the book, that the development and law mechanisms for environmental governance have fundamental limits, and that the UN needs to address the natural environment through its other two core mandates, security and human rights, as well. Conca argues that a focus on development within states and (voluntary) law among them fails to capture the environmental effects of globalization in a number of ways. One is the pollution haven effect, in which particularly environmentally noxious activities migrate to those states least able to cope with them (he writes about this in the context of regulatory races to the bottom, but the pollution haven description is the more accurate). Another is the externalization of the effects of consumption, in which producer countries are held responsible for the environmental damage of production, while the (generally richer) consumer countries are not.

The focus also fails to capture the complex relation-

ship among violent conflict, natural resources, and environmental degradation. Conca suggests that while most of the literature on this subject posits a unidirectional relationship, from degradation to conflict or from conflict to degradation, the relationship is actually circular. War degrades the environment, and both the presence of valuable resources and the absence of environmental services make peace more difficult to attain. Neither a language of development nor one of international law is particularly effective at addressing this circle.

The fourth and fifth chapters make the case for environmental human rights and environmental security, respectively, within the UN system. These chapters are primarily institutional histories of the ways in which the respective environmental mandates have had an impact within the system, and the reasons why these impacts have not been greater. A key reason in the case of environmental rights is a set of questions including what right, whose right, and what obligations an environmental human right might entail. Key reasons in the security case include national interests, an under-institutionalized security infrastructure at the UN, and a lack of clarity about the relationship between security and the environment. The chapters include a number of specific illustrative examples, including the right to water, post-conflict peacebuilding, and climate change. They also highlight the specific institutions within the system of most relevance, including the Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in chapter 4, and the Security Council and the UN's peacebuilding infrastructure in chapter 5.

The final chapter provides a set of specific suggestions for institutional reform at the UN to bring the environment more centrally into its human rights and security mandates. These range from the normative to the institutional to the programmatic. The normative recommendations revolve around acknowledging both a human right to the environment and an environmental responsibility to protect. The institutional recommendations are to both find a credible environmental role for the Security Council and create better mechanisms for UN system-wide responses to environmental issues beyond the current focus on law and development. Finally, the programmatic recommendations include environmental peacebuilding and finding ways to infuse rights and security elements into existing law and development efforts.

Not all of these suggestions are entirely convincing. One can question Conca's faith in existing UN human rights institutions that many human rights scholars find

dysfunctional and ineffective. Introducing the Security Council's veto power into global environmental governance may hinder rather than help. The responsibility to protect is currently doing none too well on its home ground of crimes against humanity, and could conceivably backfire as a mechanism to generate international responses to environmental crisis. Those states least able to implement their environmental obligations and goals within the current law and development rubric will be no more able to respond to claims of environmental rights. The list of concerns with Conca's policy recommendations could go on.

Having said this, he should be commended for making specific recommendations rather than ending with generic ideas for reform. Furthermore, while one can quibble with many (but not necessarily all) of the individual recommendations, taken as a set they provide a useful starting point for discussion of how to best inte-

grate the environment into the UN's security and rights mandates. Perhaps the most important of the recommendations are the normative ones, which depend less on specific implementation than the institutional and programmatic reforms, and more on generating a discourse which questions the conventional wisdom that the role of the UN in global environmental governance is exclusively one of development and international law.

It is questioning this conventional wisdom that is the central goal of *An Unfinished Foundation*, and it does so in a compelling fashion. Whether or not one is ultimately sympathetic to Conca's specific suggestions for UN reform, or even his broader argument about the environment and security and environmental human rights, the book provides an insightful argument about the place of the environment at the UN, a compelling history of how it got to be that way, and a convincing analysis of its shortcomings.

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Citation: J. Samuel Barkin. Review of Conca, Ken, *An Unfinished Foundation: The United Nations and Global Environmental Governance*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. March, 2016.

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