

BOOK REVIEW – JANUARY 2010

**A Review of "DICTIONARY AND INTRODUCTION TO GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE" by
Richard Saunier and Richard Meganck, Second Edition,
Earthscan, London EC1N 8XA, UK, 2009 ISBN 978-1-84407-750-2, pp 457**

This dictionary on global environmental governance was written by Richard Saunier and Richard Meganck, two highly credentialed environmental experts, after formulation of the 2007 Bali Roadmap but before the 2009 Copenhagen international climate negotiations. Much of it concerns global climate change.

As commonly understood, governance is the function of ruling a particular place or country with authority, or just controlling a particular state of affairs within a place or country. To some extent, therefore, the title of this book could involve a contradiction of terms. For it is the global environment that rules and controls us – not the reverse.

In particular, the control of global climate change appears at the present time to be beyond our competence. It certainly offers very little scope for political or theoretical solutions. Some governments seem to be confounded when they contemplate what climate change countermeasures can be imposed.

Because of the weight of public expectations to 'do something' about climate change, some political leaders seem embarrassed to admit that they cannot really do very much at all. Some may be concerned that their re-election prospects will be diminished by their inaction or failure. This could explain why some governments have been seduced by easy-sounding political solutions.

The easiest-sounding political solution of all has been cap-and-trade schemes. These highly-contrived schemes impose a price on permits to emit greenhouse gases, which can then be traded in an emissions market. They were originally used in the USA to limit sulphur dioxide levels. Many corporations have lobbied governments to implement them.

International cap-and-trade schemes may be created by treaties amongst countries. Domestic cap-and-trade schemes may be created by legislation within individual countries. Although cap-and-trade schemes may have considerable long-term potential to reduce global emissions for our environmental benefit, they are presently remote from everyday practice and experience and have been of little effect in combating global climate change. Depending on how they are designed and applied, they can also involve a considerable degree of upheaval for any country's economy. In any case, most countries are not yet ready for cap-and-trade schemes and many are unable to afford them.

Equally, if not more importantly, no country appreciates being pressured into subjugating itself to treaty-based costs or obligations. This is perfectly understandable as no-one likes being pressured into anything.

In a perceptive and informative introduction to the dictionary, the authors reveal the propensity of climate negotiators to complain of lack of political will on the part of others. The authors identify this as a common pretext by negotiators to escape the blame for their own failure when they find themselves in a situation of unresolved conflict.

Whatever the reasons may be, the international climate negotiations have not made great progress since the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was agreed in 1992. The International Energy Agency reported in 2009 that over 1000 climate change policies had been introduced around the world since 1990, without so far arresting the increase in global greenhouse gas emissions.

The Saunier/Meganck dictionary was first published in early 2007. The second edition was published in early 2009 and contains more than 5500 terms and acronyms. It is not a scientific dictionary but a subjective selection of terms used in a particular context. As the authors readily concede, it is a work in progress (indicated by an increase in content of nearly 25% from the first edition).

Ever since the adoption of 'Agenda 21' at the 1992 UN Conference in Rio de Janeiro, there has been an under-appreciated need for governments and communities to have recourse to a common language to assist them to consider and negotiate systems for the management and regulation of their common world.

The common language used in international environmental negotiations has been English. However, environmental writing and debate has become increasingly characterised by formal technical terms, technical jargon, technical abbreviations and acronyms whose meaning is unsettled –much less universally understood. As well, many of these terms are opinionated and value-laden. Hence the need for a technical dictionary of this type.

In their introduction, the authors highlight how many technical environmental terms have been used carelessly, and have often been misused, by the players. They conclude that the context of global environmental governance is now so complex as to be chaotic.

As an example of this chaos, the authors explain that the basic term 'environment' has hundreds of meanings and how it has become widely misunderstood. However, instead of citing a straightforward meaning (such as the physical or external conditions that affect plant, animal and human life), the reader is referred to the introduction where the authors go to some effort to explain that the environment does not actually exist 'outside of naming a specific time, a specific place and a specific owner'. This is all fair enough but my personal preference in a dictionary is a list of words and terms aimed at quickly clarifying their meaning, with brevity and reliability being of prime value. After all, the main function of dictionaries is to provide a reliable source of meaning of words and terms for those who may not be familiar with them.

There is certainly a need for a specialist environmental dictionary and a very valuable attribute of this work is the citation of the sources of most of the definitions that appear in it. However, in this reviewer's opinion, the inclusion of many terms that are unsettled risks causing confusion as much as it may provide clarification.

A number of fundamental legal definitions are also plainly wrong and could be quite misleading to the uninitiated. A few examples: the basic term 'law' is defined as an act or bill passed by a legislative body (without any mention of the accumulated body of common law, civil law or international law); 'international law' is defined as the rules that govern the relationships of states with each other (without any mention of the legal rules that govern relations between non-state actors); 'environmental law' is defined as a body of law that seeks to protect the natural

environment from human activities (without any mention of the laws that seek to enhance the environment); and 'environmental policy' is defined as a set of rules and regulations that relate to a given environmental parameter (whereas policy in parliamentary systems of government is not made up of rules in the legal sense but is merely an expression of the current preference of a particular government that is not legally binding either on the populace or on the government itself). These examples from the field of law are not representative of the quality of the overall work but they do indicate a tendency to excessively lenient treatment.

Any criticism of this type should be tempered given the global context of an evolving and still messy system of governance of international environmental affairs. As the authors make clear in their introduction, this is mainly due to the fact that the world is

comprised of independent, self-governing states that have sovereignty over their own affairs, limited only by international treaties that they choose voluntarily to enter into.

There is no doubt that access to 5500 environmental terms and acronyms in a single volume will be very helpful for readers wishing to quickly check their meaning. However, placing reliance on some of these terms without additional checking may involve a degree of risk and I feel that this robs an otherwise meritorious work of much of its value. Future editions would I believe benefit by a more strict reassessment of what presently appears.

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