

**Build Back Greener: The Potential of Environmental  
Diplomacy in Ensuring a Better Post-Pandemic World**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented repercussions on health and socio-economic systems worldwide. While contention remains, it is widely regarded that the COVID-19 pandemic is a zoonosis. This means that the virus that causes the disease originally came from animals. Due to this, there have been increasing attempts to frame the pandemic as an environmental issue. Anthropogenic activities such as food production and land conversion have diminished natural habitats and weakened the natural barrier between animals and humans. The emergence of zoonotic diseases has also been exacerbated by practices such as wildlife trade and consumption. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated that the impacts of environmental issues do not recognize national boundaries. As such, no single state can resolve these issues. International environmental cooperation is necessary to ensure a better, sustainable, and pandemic-proof future. The paper discusses the history and concept of environmental diplomacy and emphasizes its growing importance in the post-pandemic world. As the pandemic has concretized the transnational effects of environmental issues, it is expected that the environmental agenda will be prioritized in different international forums. Aside from a discussion on environmental diplomacy, the paper also presents a theoretical framework to explain states' motivation to engage and participate in environmental diplomacy and agreements. Lastly, the paper also explains the role of the United Nations, especially the United Nations Environmental Programme, in strengthening multilateral environmental action.

## **Introduction**

The current COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread and unprecedented disruptions to societies worldwide. The United Nations Development Programme has called the pandemic the greatest challenge the world has faced since World War II (COVID-19 Pandemic, n.d). Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund characterized the economic downturn that resulted from the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns as the worst recession since the Great Depression (Gopinath, 2014). This has translated to tens of millions of people at risk of falling into extreme poverty. Aside from that, the livelihood of almost half of the global population is also threatened, especially those belonging to the informal sector (Impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, their health, and our food systems, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Most of the evidence on the origin of the virus identifies animals as the source of the virus. This has also been corroborated by the WHO-convened Report on the Origin of the Virus and other independent research projects (WHO-convened Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part, 2021; Tiwari, et al, 2020; Rodriguez-Morales et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020). The aforementioned WHO report identified bats as the likely source of the virus. Furthermore, the report also noted that introduction through an intermediate host was the most plausible pathway of SARS-CoV-2 (WHO-convened Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part, 2021). Hence, the pandemic is widely recognized as a zoonotic disease. Zoonoses are infectious diseases caused by parasitic, viral, bacterial, or other unconventional pathogens originally found in animals but have managed to be transmitted to humans (Zoonoses, 2020).

Due to its possible zoonotic origins, the COVID-19 pandemic has been viewed as an environmental issue. This is because human activities such as increased food production and

rampant land conversion have been cited as key drivers of the emergence of zoonotic diseases. Climate change and more extreme weather disturbances also have the potential to disrupt ecosystems leading to the development of new zoonotic diseases. As a response to this, calls to prioritize biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration have been growing. In recognition of the impact of continuing environmental degradation on human health, policymakers worldwide have emphasized the need for a “green recovery” (Green Recovery, 2021). An example of this is the European Union’s NextGenerationEU, a recovery package that has intensified commitments for climate neutrality and environmental protection (Recovery plan for Europe, n.d.).

The acknowledgment of the pandemic as an environmental problem and the realization of the globality of environmental impacts can provide impetus to international environmental protection and climate action. Hence, environmental diplomacy is needed to align global priorities, increase investments in climate-resilient technologies and raise awareness about environmental problems. The wide scope of environmental problems and their transnational effects make it impossible for a single state to implement effective solutions. As such, environmental diplomacy will be a cornerstone in ensuring a better world post-COVID-19.

With these premises, this paper will explore the concept of environmental diplomacy and its expected prioritization in the international arena in light of the pandemic. The next section will further expound on the relations between the pandemic and the environment. Afterward, the concept and history of environmental diplomacy will be tackled. Next, theoretical underpinnings of environmental diplomacy will be presented which will be followed by a discussion on the effectiveness of environmental diplomacy and agreements. The last section will emphasize the need for multilateralism in ensuring a better future.

## **The Link Between COVID-19 and the Environment**

Emerging infectious diseases like COVID-19 are inextricably linked to the state of the environment (Mishra et al., 2021). For example, climate change alters climate conditions impacts the growth and survival of pathogens. Aside from this, climate-induced natural disasters like droughts and floods cause abrupt spikes in the population of some species which can serve as a vector for new infectious diseases. Furthermore, increasing demand for food and real estate has fueled the conversion of forests and other natural environments for agricultural and commercial purposes. These activities result in decreasing habitat for wildlife and weakening the natural barriers between animals and humans making the emergence of zoonotic diseases more likely (Science points to causes of COVID-19, 2020).

In 2016, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has identified zoonoses as an international concern. Before COVID-19, other zoonotic outbreaks and epidemics have also occurred in the past years. Examples include the West Nile virus in 2019, Zika virus in 2015, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012, the H1N1 flu in 2009, and the Severe Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002 (Science points to causes of COVID-19, 2020). According to the zoonoses, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2020) around 70% of emerging diseases are considered zoonoses. As illustrated by the ongoing pandemic, zoonotic diseases pose threats to human health due to the absence of antibodies that can protect the body from the disease (Science points to causes of COVID-19, 2020).

The pandemic has effectively concretized the interlinkages of the environment and human health. To prevent the human population from future pandemics, there is a need to boost environmental protection (Science points to causes of COVID-19, 2020). Moreover, there is

also a need to protect habitats to raise the genetic diversity of animals which is associated with disease resistance making outbreaks less likely. With the COVID-19 pandemic being framed as an environmental issue, it is expected that environmental issues will be a key priority in different bilateral and multilateral forums in the post-pandemic world. This is because the serious social, economic, and political effects of the pandemic can compel states to re-strategize their development priorities and be more open to international environmental cooperation.

## **Environmental Diplomacy: Concept and History**

While the practice of environmental diplomacy has existed for a long time, its place in the international arena has only been recently recognized. As early as the 14th century, European powers have exhibited international efforts to protect the environment when they agreed to enter into agreements to regulate fishing resources. In the centuries that followed, environmental diplomacy took on a multilateral dimension culminating in the organization of the Stockholm Summit, the first multilateral summit dedicated to tackling environmental issues, in 1972 (Ali & Vladich, 2016; Orsini, 2020).

The Stockholm Summit resulted in the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Apart from this, the summit also transformed the environment as a key international issue. During this time, the term environmental diplomacy was formalized and began gaining prominence (Ali & Vladich, 2016). In 1992, two decades after the establishment of UNEP, the Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This summit saw environmental diplomacy further develop to include broader themes and issues and actors (Ali & Vladich, 2016). The Earth Summit also popularized the use of multilateral agreements to resolve and manage regional and global environmental issues (Dorsey, 2014).

The conceptualization of environmental diplomacy has varied over time. Ali and Vladich (2016) maintained that the definition of environmental diplomacy remains contested and nascent. The earliest conceptions of environmental diplomacy followed the Westphalian tradition of nation-states and the conventional view of diplomatic processes. In line with this, environmental diplomacy was seen as a process whereby nation-states discussed and negotiated to form bilateral or multilateral commitments. However, contemporary definitions of environmental diplomacy recognize that the environment is a wide-ranging issue that has multiple levels of engagement. Broadhurst and Ledgerwood (1998) defined environmental diplomacy as international negotiations that aim to solve issues regarding pollution and environmental degradation. They also argued that the process should not be viewed just in terms of states approving treaties but rather as an inclusive process that considers the views of non-state actors. Regarding subject area, environmental diplomacy, in theory, is solely concerned about environmental issues; in practice, the environment is a cross-cutting issue related to other topics such as intellectual property, health, security, trade, and energy among others (Orsini, 2020).

Environmental diplomacy usually results in the signing of treaties at different levels (bilateral, multilateral and, world levels) to ensure compliance with the agreed-upon commitments (Li et al., 2020). Citing UNEP data, Susskind and Ali (2014) and Li et al. (2020) noted that there have been over five hundred internationally recognized agreements relating to the environment. This includes 155 agreements relating to biodiversity, 61 relating to the atmosphere, 196 broadly relating to water, 179 relating to chemicals and other hazardous wastes and substances, and 46 relating to land. After trade issues, environmental concerns have now become the most popular subject of international agreements.

In the post-pandemic world, the issue of the environment is expected to receive increased attention in international affairs. Last September 2020, world leaders encouraged making environmental protection a central theme of post-pandemic recovery (Make Bold Environmental Action Central Focus of Post Pandemic Economic Recovery, 2020). In the same vein, Inger Andersen, UNEP Executive Director, affirmed the potential of multilateralism in achieving an environment-focused recovery (Multilateral action for a green post-COVID-19 recovery, 2020). Better implementation of environmental agreements has also been cited as a salient element in ensuring a sustainable world post-COVID-19 (McNeely, 2021). All of these stress the need for a global concerted effort to protect the environment and prevent future pandemics from happening.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of Environmental Diplomacy**

Many externalities caused by environmental problems are widely spread affecting many countries and regions. These externalities contribute to biodiversity loss, ecosystem damage, and emerging health hazards. Some externalities like the effects of greenhouse gas emission are global while others are more regional. In general, these are considered global environmental externalities which are defined as “negative environmental consequences of direct natural resource use and human production and consumption activities arising in broad spatial settings in the presence of incomplete property rights” (Libecap, 2014). As a response to this, states commonly turn to environmental diplomacy to enact international environmental agreements that can help manage and address these externalities (Barrett, 2005).

In explaining the motivation behind states’ participation in environmental diplomacy and implementation of environmental agreements, scholars often use the neoliberal institutionalist perspective. Current scholarship on neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes the role of



international organizations to encourage cooperation by removing incentives from states for non-compliance to international agreements and norms and other related issues (Meiser, 2012; O'Neill, 2009). Examining mostly environmental and economic issues, neoliberal institutionalists focus on self-interest, recognize anarchy at the international level, and employ game theory to explain cooperation among states and institutions (Stein, 2008; Whyte, 2012).

Neoliberal institutionalists usually utilize game theory to model environmental diplomacy and international environmental cooperation. In environmental diplomacy, states are the main decision-makers and their level of welfare is interdependent. This means that one country's situation is not only reliant on their actions but also the actions of other states. As such, the management and protection of transnational environmental issues are considered a game that states enter to mutually ensure benefits (Barrett, 2005). Due to the problem of anarchy in the international arena, there are incentives for states to evade responsibilities set out in international agreements. When this happens, that state can enjoy the benefits of the agreement without incurring any costs for the adjustment. This is also known as the free-rider problem. Under this situation, states have no incentives to actively participate and cooperate in solving international problems choosing instead to rely on the efforts of other actors. In resolving this, neoliberal institutionalists look to mechanisms that will allow for the recognition of mutual gains and institutions that can track compliance, minimize the costs of cooperation, and prevent non-fulfillment of obligations. Multilateral non-state institutions, such as the United Nations, and/or non-government organizations commonly take this role intending to promote transparency leading to higher chances of creating agreements that can last in the long term (O'Neill, 2009).

Barrett (2005) argues that international environmental agreements can be analyzed as a stage game. Under this, a state's decision to participate in an agreement or not is different from the decision regarding the state's commitments in the agreement. In this model, it is assumed that states maximizing welfare are the main actors in the negotiations and agreements and there is no supranational entity that can force states to participate in an agreement. This paper furthers neoliberal institutionalism by positing that certain global events linked to environmental degradation can affect the game. O'Neill (2009) used the term crises and argued that they provide an impetus for states to open negotiations. This paper furthers this by arguing that these types of events can boost trust and cooperation among states to urgently and effectively form international environmental agreements. This is because it is in the mutual interest of all states to immediately resolve and manage the crisis, mitigate its effects, and prevent it from happening in the future. As COVID-19 disease is generally seen as linked to environmental issues and has caused global disruptions, the pandemic illustrates a crisis, hence, it has the potential to boost cooperation between and among states.

### **Measuring the Effects of Environmental Diplomacy**

There is mixed evidence concerning the effectiveness of environmental diplomacy and international environmental agreements. In some cases, the goals of the negotiations have been achieved and have led to improved environmental quality (Mitchell, 2003). Many scholars argue that environmental diplomacy which results in international agreements can change states' cost-benefit calculation through the provision of critical information regarding the costs of environmental degradation. In this, agreements are seen as significant tools in improving environmental conditions (Vollenweider, 2012). For example, many scholars attribute the reduction in production and use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in developed countries to the ozone agreements. In particular, the Montreal Protocol signed in 1987 to phase out CFCs is

widely considered the most successful environmental agreement. Aside from that, the convention protecting fur seals signed in 1911 was widely seen as a successful endeavor as it led to the recovery of seal stocks. However, some agreements have had no substantial effect leading to continued deterioration of the environment. For example, despite global and regional efforts, the condition of fish stocks and marine ecosystems has worsened (Mitchell, 2003; de Zeeuw, 2015). Meanwhile, Li et al. (2020) examined the effect of environmental diplomacy on a country's carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emission level. In particular, the study tested if a country's signing an environmental treaty leads to lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Results of the study revealed that in the short run signing environmental treaties reduces the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of developing countries. However, in the long-term, more treaties were associated with the increase of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for both developed and developing countries. Similar results were noted by Khan and Hou (2021). Focusing on the United States, the authors found out that environmental diplomacy has a positive effect on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This means that the United States' increased participation in environmental diplomacy led to higher emissions.

Some argue that the inconclusiveness of the effect of international environmental agreements is due to the difficulties associated with assessing their impacts. Kellenberg and Levinson (2013) point to two challenges in empirically examining the impact of environmental agreements: (1) problems in estimating counterfactual outcomes; (2) unavailable or limited data of the indicators before the implementation of the agreement. Due to these constraints, only a small number of agreements have been analyzed. Lastly, several variables have been identified to explain the variations in the effectiveness of environmental agreements. This includes both endogenous and exogenous factors like the specific design features of the agreement, the characteristics of the parties, the environmental issues, and the international context among others (Mitchell, 2003). Despite the disagreement on its impacts, environmental

diplomacy remains a key tool in global environmental governance as conventions and agreements remain the main legal instruments in international environmental protection (Escobar-Pemberthy & Ivanova, 2020).

## **The Need for Environmental Diplomacy**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the planet has already been experiencing ecological decay and environmental degradation. Due to unsustainable production and consumption, three global environmental crises have been impacting the planet for decades – the climate crisis, the nature crisis, and the pollution and water crisis. These crises have manifested themselves through rising sea levels, global warming, and extreme weather disturbances. To mitigate the effects of these crises and prevent worsening effects, multilateral environmental cooperation needs to be strengthened. Multilateralism has not always attained its goals. For example, there has been uneven progress among states in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Aside from that, the Aichi Targets that aim to stop biodiversity loss were also not achieved. However, multilateral action has also led to environmental improvements. For example, the Vienna Convention to Protect the Ozone Layer and its Montreal Protocol has been lauded for protecting the ozone layer. As such, the UNEP maintains that multilateralism works. Failure of multilateral action has often boiled down to states not committing strongly enough and/or failing to enact their commitments. At this critical juncture, there is a need to establish strong commitment from states and ensure the effective implementation of already existing conventions like the Paris Agreement to ascertain a sustainable future. For this purpose, there is a need to boost environmental diplomacy and negotiations and the institutions that enable this. Currently, many institutions have emphasized the need for a “green recovery” in post-pandemic strategies. The practice of green recovery is a welcome start as this means that states are open to resolving environmental problems. However, certain mechanisms that will allow

for must be adopted by the international community. Moreover, multilateral environmental action also needs to take into account the situation of developing countries. Lack of capacity and resources to respond to climate mitigation and adaptation have remained a significant challenge for developing countries. In conclusion, the links between the environment and human health emphasize that a better future can only be achieved through a more sustainable relationship with the environment.

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