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Maria Ivanova. *The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution: UNEP at Fifty*. Cambridge: One Planet/MIT Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780262542104 (paperback, \$30.00).

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On Earth Day 2021, at a U.S.-organized climate summit, the Biden administration pledged to cut U.S. emissions to half of 2005 levels by 2030 and earmark billions in new development aid for environmental projects in developing countries. It was a bold recommitment to climate multilateralism, the administration argued, a restoration of U.S. leadership in the system of global climate governance: the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its scientific body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).¹ Both the IPCC, launched in 1988, and the UNFCCC, created at the landmark 1992 "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, received strong bipartisan support from a Republican White House and Democratic House and Senate.

Twenty years before Rio, developed and developing country governments met in Stockholm, Sweden for the UN Conference on the Environment. The most important result of the June 1972 meeting was the creation of the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), the first global institution of its kind as well as the first headquartered in the global South (more on that later). "Small, smart, and nimble," UNEP was created to act as an "anchor institution" for all environmental happenings in the UN, with a practical mandate for intergovernmental coordination and a normative mandate for policy and action (7). In 1987, UNEP scored a major success in the Montréal Protocol banning the use of chlorofluorocarbons, a move supported even by the hardline Reagan Administration. "The Montreal protocol is a model of cooperation," President Ronald Reagan said after signing, "[the] result of an extraordinary process of scientific study, negotiations among representatives of the business and environmental communities, and international diplomacy. It is a monumental achievement."²

Montréal—which did in fact provide a model and momentum for climate talks from Rio and Kyoto in the 1990s—was UNEP's achievement. As Maria Ivanova explains in her engaging and important new history of the global body, which turns fifty next year, UNEP cajoled, coordinated, and convened scientists and governments into what one expert called "the fastest [environmental] agreement we've ever had" (74).

¹ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, and National Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy, April 22, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/04/22/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-special-presidential-envoy-for-climate-john-kerry-and-national-climate-advisor-gina-mccarthy-april-22-2021/>.

² Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Signing the Montreal Protocol on Ozone-Depleting Substances," 5 April 1988, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-signing-montreal-protocol-ozone-depleting-substances>

Within a decade, however, UNEP was at the margins of global climate change discussions, which have been dominated ever since by the UNFCCC and IPCC.

Global governance scholars have offered a number of explanations for UNEP's trajectory, including its funding model (voluntary), mission (the UN "Everything Program"), location (Nairobi), status ("programme"), and voting (democratic, via the General Assembly). Taken together, some critics argue that UNEP was designed to be weak ("deficiency by design") by North and South governments alike, who saw a choice between economic growth and environmental protection and went with the former (12).³ In *The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution*, Ivanova, a leading scholar of global climate politics, uses UNEP's under-explored history to both upend these assumptions and defend its accomplishments. Ivanova is not alone in standing up for UNEP, nor is its story exactly "untold."⁴ But the one book-length history we do have, by British politician and conservationist Stanley Johnson, was commissioned by UNEP for its 40th anniversary, making Ivanova's the only academic history of the first global environmental organization.⁵

The 1972 Stockholm conference is a sort of lodestar for Ivanova's book, and we learn something new about it in each of the seven chapters. The book is arranged by issue, so this makes sense, but it also reflects a deeper truth about UNEP's history, which is that its auspicious founding made it, in a sense, a victim of circumstance. In fact, when viewed from the perspective of just a few years later—amid a global economic crisis and North-South acrimony over the Group of 77 developing countries' proposed New International Economic Order (NIEO)—Stockholm seems like a last burst of light before a power outage. The Nixon Administration was a strong supporter of the conference—"second only to Sweden"—as well as a strong UNEP (34). Contributions would be voluntary, but the U.S. and other rich countries would assume the vast majority of expenses out of ability and responsibility. At the same time, as a 'subsidiary' institution, UNEP would be controlled by the UN General Assembly, where one-country-one-vote meant that the developing countries could shape its agenda.

Most uniquely, delegates agreed that the new institution would have its headquarters not in New York or Geneva, but Nairobi, Kenya. The selection of Nairobi was a contentious choice within and beyond the South, and the outcome of intense political lobbying by Kenya's government (led by independence hero Jomo Kenyatta). Representatives from the North counseled against the decision, warning that its isolation from New York and Geneva would decrease its effectiveness. Delegates from developing countries were aware of this risk, but saw UNEP's location as a "golden opportunity" to redistribute power in the UN system through geography, and their vote in favor was "decisive" (49). While the choice was a noble one, there was definitely a price paid for stationing UNEP in Kenya, as it indeed suffered from poor communications and inadequate

³ For this view see Konrad von Moltke, "The Organization of the Impossible," *Global Environmental Politics* 1, no. 1 (2001): 23-28; Adil Najam, "The Case against GEO, WEO, or Whatever-Else-EO," in D. Brack and J. Hyvarinen, eds., *Global Environmental Institutions: Perspectives on Reform* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2002) and "The Case against a New International Environmental Organization," *Global Governance* 9 (2003): 367-384; and Bharat H. Desai, "UNEP: A Global Environmental Authority?" *Environmental Policy and Law* 36:3-4 (2006): 137-156.

⁴ For a wider range of perspectives on UNEP and its global role, see Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer, *A World Environment Organization: Solution or Threat for Effective International Environmental Governance?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

⁵ Stanley Johnson, *UNEP: The First 40 Years, A Narrative* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2012).

staffing despite the information revolution of the 1990s and 2000s. Today, Ivanova tells us, only 36% of developing countries have missions there (118). Still, the G-77 can hardly be faulted for the North's false promise in 1972 that funding would not just continue, but grow. As we also learn from the book, since UNEP's founding donor contributions have declined by 38% in real terms (43). In a scenario familiar to its institutional relatives, the World Health Organization and the UN Development Programme, 87% (!) of donor contributions to UNEP are "earmarked resources that respond primarily to donor preferences and limit the organization's initiative" (11). In short, less money with more earmarks equals less power for both UNEP and the G-77.

Maurice Strong, a larger-than-life Canadian oilman-turned-development advocate, was the conference's unlikely but necessary chair, as well as UNEP's first Director (1972-76). In Ivanova's telling (based on oral interviews and UNEP archives), Strong's personality and connections were essential at Stockholm and beyond. Familiar North-South tensions almost threatened to "derail" the conference in its preparatory stages, but it was Strong who convinced a skeptical South to join negotiations, in part by playing to those nations' well-earned pessimism. ("If the developing countries sit out the conference, it would leave the hands in the issues of the industrialized countries," he told Indian leader Indira Gandhi, 28). Strong also surrounded himself with influential global South economists, including UNCTAD's Gamani Corea, the World Bank's Mahbub ul-Haq, and Uruguayan central banker Enrique Iglesias. With Barbara Ward, the pioneering British development economist, Strong orchestrated the compilation of the June 1971 *Founex Report*. Authored by a panel of twenty-seven economists and scientists from the South, the Report was a landmark early consensus on what would later be called "sustainable development" (31).

UNEP had other achievements between Stockholm and Montréal (and after), and Ivanova devotes a chapter to its research and diplomatic contributions in combatting marine pollution, desertification, and environmental pollution from dangerous chemicals and industrial byproducts. But the personality at the top mattered, and in Ivanova's telling, the man who replaced Strong as Director—Egyptian scientist Mustafa Tolba (1976-1992)—was not easy to work with, or for. A self-styled "head basher" in international negotiations, Tolba saw himself as an "honest broker" focused on practical rather than normative matters (153-54). To others, Tolba was infamous for his "bullying, cajoling, wheedling, and threatening tactics," as Ivanova quotes one UK diplomat (154). Ivanova praises Tolba's scientific bend and inquisitive mind, and credits his practical and intellectual contributions to sustainable development, but her account of his impact on UNEP's culture is withering. The "imposing and commanding" Tolba "could not be challenged," and his intensely hierarchical approach created "turf battles among divisions" and even a "cult of personality" around the charismatic former chemist" (155).

Perhaps most frustrating in retrospect is Tolba's decision to sit on the sidelines before and during the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, or "Earth Summit" (68). UNEP's marginalization at Rio and the UNFCCC's creation coincided with two world-historical developments, the collapse of communism and the spread of neoliberal globalization, both of which would also determine its future. Through the UNFCCC process in the 1990s, U.S. President Bill Clinton and other world leaders embraced a different model for combatting climate change than UNEP's, one that placed "free-market mechanisms" like carbon trading at the center over issues of equity and development. "UNEP had an opportunity [in the 1990s] to reclaim its coordination role," Ivanova laments. "However, it had all but lost its preeminent...power in the field because it had not engaged substantially during the Rio Earth Summit and had little influence over the environmental narrative" (68).

Ivanova's very engaging new history left me with a startling realization, which is that development was *nowhere* in the climate debates of the 1990s and 2000s, and that this absence made carbon path-dependency an easy option for old and new polluters alike. After almost thirty years of global negotiations, we know that relying on emissions trading was both inadequate—it takes more than a 'nudge' to shift major economies' foundations—and unjust—the rich can pay, so the rich can emit and/or transition. In 2010, the U.S. and other governments finally established a new mechanism, the Green Climate Fund (GCF), with the task of designing, coordinating, and financing climate adaptation projects in developing countries. UNEP's own multilateral Environment Fund (EF), on the other hand, goes back to the organization's founding in 1972. "U.S. participation [in the EF] was expected to be exemplary and a reflection of its status as the world's major polluter," Ivanova explains (40). Today, the U.S. is the EF's third largest contributor, at \$8.1 million per year, just under Germany and the Netherlands and just over France. (Of the top four, only the U.S. continues to give under its "fair share" scaled contribution.)⁶ Meant to be UNEP's core source of funding, the EF now constitutes just 12 percent of UNEP's total budget; in real terms, its capitalization has not increased since 1974 (43-44). With this in mind, the G-77's dashed hopes for redistributing power and resources from North to South through a strong UNEP based in Nairobi, a global South world city, is all the more tragic. One can't help but wonder if in North-South negotiations, cynicism pays better dividends than hope.

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⁶ Quotes and figures from UNEP, <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment-programme/funding-and-partnerships/environment-fund>.