

97. Earth System Governance

The Earth System Governance project is a project of the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change. It is a major social science research network whose members look beyond current government and political systems and towards the structures needed to manage human societies in the Anthropocene. Their many international activities work towards social justice as well as ecological sustainability.

Introduction

The Earth System Governance project, set up in 2009, has seen rapid growth in its members, affiliated institutions and activities. It is now one of the larger social science research networks in the area of governance and global environmental change. This international research programme explores political solutions and novel, more effective governance systems to cope with the current transitions in the planet's biogeochemical systems. The normative context of the research network is sustainable development: its members see Earth system governance not only as a question of governance effectiveness, but also as a challenge for political legitimacy and social justice.

Earth system governance is a relatively new paradigm. It conceptualises a system of formal and informal rules, rule-making mechanisms and actor networks at all levels of human society from the local to the global, to steer societies towards preventing, mitigating and adapting to global and local environmental change and Earth system transformation. It builds on earlier notions of environmental policy and nature conservation, but puts these into the broader context of human-induced transformations of the entire Earth system.

The concept of governance differs from government in that it brings together numerous forms of societal steering that are often non-hierarchical, decentralised, open to self-organisation, and inclusive of non-state actors. These actors range from industry and non-governmental organisations to scientists, indigenous communities, city governments and international organisations.

The Earth System Governance project builds on a conceptual framework, developed in its science plan, that is organised according to five analytical problems: the overall architecture of Earth system governance; its agency within and beyond the state; the adaptiveness of governance mechanisms; the accountability and legitimacy of governance mechanisms; and the modes of allocation and access in Earth system governance.

Research and key findings

The project has generated new research findings, including:

- Fragmentation of governance is often problematic but in many cases can be improved by well-designed management of the interplay of different institutions.
- Agency in Earth system governance: private institutions are unlikely to have a major impact on Earth system governance, even though a few individual partnerships have proven effective. This includes more than 300 multisectoral public-private partnerships agreed at the time of the 2002 Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development.

Activities

The Earth System Governance project's activities are characterised by an international, bottom-up, member-driven, networked structure, which has developed into a broader global research alliance. For example:

- The project was highly active in the scientific support for the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). It created a website which included an online discussion forum on how to improve the institutional framework of sustainable development. Before the conference, it drafted a comprehensive policy assessment which argued for an overhaul of the UN system and a “constitutional moment” in world politics. A short version was published ahead of the Rio+20 Conference in *Science*.
- The project has pioneered a number of network structures and activities that differentiate it from more traditional international research projects. The network now includes a number of Earth System Governance research centres, a group of select lead faculty, and more than 200 research fellows.
- The project has held numerous international conferences on Earth system governance.
- Smaller workshops, summer schools and training programmes are being organised in many places in Europe, Asia, Africa and North America.¹

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www.earthsystemgovernance.org

Note

1. www.earthsystemgovernance.org.



From:
World Social Science Report 2013
Changing Global Environments

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264203419-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

International Social Science Council/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2013), "Earth System Governance", in *World Social Science Report 2013: Changing Global Environments*, OECD Publishing, Paris/Unesco Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264203419-101-en>

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