

**“Governance in the Anthropocene: Towards Planetary Stewardship”**

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Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful and honoured to speak today to this highest body of the United Nations. Issues of global environmental change and sustainable development belong to the foremost problems that need to be addressed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For this reason, I am excited to be able to participate in today’s 4<sup>th</sup> dialogue of the General Assembly on “Harmony with Nature” to commemorate International Mother Earth Day.

I am speaking here as a member of the scientific community, and, in particular, as a representative of the Earth System Governance Project, which is a global network of hundreds of social scientists, all working together to advance our knowledge on institutions, governance, and political processes, from local to global levels.

The project’s name—the Earth System Governance Project—reflects a major paradigmatic change in our understanding. Today, we are no longer facing challenges that can be accurately described by the term “environmental policy”. Instead, we are faced with a fundamental transformation of core elements of the entire earth system. As the science community has shown in numerous as-

assessments, humankind has become a major force that influences key system parameters of our planet. This is reflected in an ongoing discussion among geologists about whether the current period in the history of our planet should now receive a new name—the “Anthropocene”, named after the most dominant species on earth: humankind.

For this reason, social scientists working on environmental policy now increasingly use the term “earth system” governance. Earth system governance is today one of the key challenges for policy makers and governments—and for the collective institutions that governments have created. Most prominently, it is a key challenge for the United Nations.<sup>1</sup>

Will the United Nations deliver? In the academic networks of political scientists and public policy scholars, much recent research has criticized the effectiveness of multilateral decision-making in the UN context, and in the UN style. There are scholars who have declared the end of “mega-multilateralism”. There are scholars who even advise to never attend any international diplomatic conference but rather to visit only the side events of NGOs, local governments, and civil society—because this is where the initiative, the energy, the enthusiasm, and eventually also the solutions lie. To some extent, these critics may have a point. Global networks of cities, public-private partnerships, social movements, they are all important. They all can, and should, play a role.

However, recent research has shown that such activities cannot replace state action and multilateral institutions. And despite recent set-backs, there is also sufficient evidence to show that multilateralism can work. As one example, multilateral cooperation has helped to phase out the emissions of chlorofluorocarbons and to protect the stratospheric ozone layer. However, even this success story shows one major shortcoming—it took over 20 years from the first diplomatic conferences to a largely effective international institution. In many other pressing issue areas, we do not have the time.

For this reason, we need to engage in a process of serious reform of international governance and institutions. We cannot resolve the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with institutions that function with rules that essentially stem from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We need transformation. We need to explore, scientifically and politically, new types of multilateralism.

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<sup>1</sup> See in more detail F. Biermann, *Earth System Governance: World Politics in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014, in press).

In early 2012, with a group of 33 leading social scientists we published a paper in the journal *Science* on the reform of the institutional framework for sustainable development.<sup>2</sup> Our main conclusion was that business as usual is not the way forward in sustainable development. Instead, we called for a constitutional moment in international relations, and for fundamental reforms in the way in which negotiations and global policy processes are conducted.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me give you three examples:

First, research indicates that the decision-making rules in multilateral negotiations and in the UN system are largely outdated. They are not effective, and generally not fair.

For one, the consensus rule is still one of the key decision-making principles in many multilateral environmental agreements. In consensus-based systems, each country has a veto. Any decision depends on the interests of the least interested government. This is not an effective way to make progress.

Our research suggests that majority voting can speed up decisions. We do not argue that every decision must be taken by majority. Yet the more majority-based decision-making is accepted, the better for speedy decisions with sufficient force. And such decisions is what our planet urgently needs.

But majority voting is determined, of course, by the weight of the votes that each country can hold and by the kind of majorities that are needed.

In the United Nations of today, the one-country-one-vote approach gives, in theory, an absolute majority of votes to a theoretical coalition of countries that represent roughly five percent of global population. This under-represents the millions of people who live in countries with large populations.

Alternatives, however, also come with problems. Suppose the votes of countries would be weighted by the size of their population, an absolute majority would then be held by a theoretical

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<sup>2</sup> See F. Biermann, K. Abbott, S. Andresen, K. Bäckstrand, S. Bernstein, M. M. Betsill, H. Bulkeley, B. Cashore, J. Clapp, C. Folke, A. Gupta, J. Gupta, P. M. Haas, A. Jordan, N. Kanie, T. Kluvánková-Oravská, L. Lebel, D. Liverman, J. Meadowcroft, R. B. Mitchell, P. Newell, S. Oberthür, L. Olsson, P. Pattberg, R. Sánchez-Rodríguez, H. Schroeder, A. Underdal, S. Camargo Vieira, C. Vogel, O. R. Young, A. Brock, and R. Zondervan (2012) Navigating the Anthropocene: Improving earth system governance. *Science*, vol. 335, no. 6074, 1306-1307 (16 March).

coalition of merely seven countries. The remaining 186 countries together would hold less than 50% of the votes. Again, many countries will have problems with such weighting of votes as well.

Some might argue that the economic strength and financial contributions of countries should be weighted in decision-making. Obviously, however, this would come with similar problems of lack of acceptance by many countries.

Others might argue for regional seats—yet what would be these regions? Do we have clear and stable regional groupings of countries and interests in all parts of the world, useful for all issue domains?

Compromises, and innovative ideas, are needed that generate support for a new type of multilateralism. We could think about different majority and voting rules for different issue areas. We can think about multiple, complex, combined, or layered majorities. And surely, we need to clearly define institutional guarantees that protect smaller countries.

A second area of needed reform is the accountability of global decision-making. We have experienced over the last years an increase in global governance. New institutions were created, and old ones have gained new power. This stronger role for intergovernmental institutions raises problems of relating back to citizens. Citizens lack knowledge about what happens “in New York”, or “in Geneva”, in anonymous institutions that are difficult to understand, difficult to follow, and difficult to support. A “democratic deficit” of the UN bureaucracy is felt in many parts of the world. When we want to strengthen the United Nations in order to help with our overarching goal of planetary stewardship, we have to address this potential lack of trust or understanding among citizens.

One way is to better include the voice of the citizens in UN processes. This is being done already to some extent, and we clearly have moved forward from the secret diplomacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This event today, with nongovernmental stakeholders being invited to the podium, is a very good example, among many others. Yet to really interlink global decisions with local trust and accountability, more steps are needed. In the academic community, numerous proposals are being discussed. Some scholars argue for global deliberative assemblies of citizens of all countries and regions. Others call for a parliamentary assembly as a second chamber in the UN system, bringing in the direct representatives of the people. Others again argue for upgrading the major-groups in the UN system through a forum of civil society organizations, also possibly as a second, or third,

chamber that would represent global civil society. There are many advantages and disadvantages of all of these proposals, and I cannot go into these details here today. But I am truly convinced that if we want to have more effective global governance of sustainable development, there is an urgent need to address the current legitimacy and accountability deficit in global institutions.

Third, there is no doubt that equity and fairness must be at the heart of a durable international framework for sustainable development. There is no country in the world where wealth is so unequally divided as on this planet as a whole. 842 million people do not have sufficient food. Planetary stewardship and earth system governance, to be effective, need to operate in this context. To this end, our policy reports argue clearly that financial support of poorer countries remains essential. More substantial financial resources could be made available, for example, through novel financial mechanisms, such as global emissions markets or air transportation levies for sustainability purposes.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

The world saw a major transformative shift in governance after 1945 that led to the establishment of the United Nations and numerous other international organizations, along with far-reaching new international legal norms on human rights and economic cooperation. We need similar changes today, a “constitutional moment” in global governance, on behalf of our stewardship for the planet.

Such a reform of the intergovernmental system will not be the only level of societal change nor the only type of action that is needed toward sustainability. Changes in the behavior of individual citizens, in societies, new engagement of civil society organizations, and reorientation of the private sector toward a sustainable economy, are all crucial to achieve progress. Yet, in order for local and national action to be effective, the global institutional framework must be supportive and well designed.

New policies, and new ideas, are needed. Let’s start to break new ground. Let’s engage in a process of renewing our global institutions. The social science community is ready to engage with governments, and with the UN system, to assist in generating these new ideas.

Thank you for your attention.