

The Evolution of Environmental Policy: A Historical Overview of Key Global Agreements

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Abstract

Environmental policy has evolved significantly over the last decade as global concerns about environmental degradation, climatic changes, and resource management have grown. The history of environmental agreements reflects an increasing recognition of the need for coordinated global action to address these concerns on international level. This paper examines the development of key international environmental agreements, including landmark conferences and treaties, and links them to sustainable practices that are emerging in the context of "Viksit Bharat" (India's vision for a more sustainable future). By analyzing the historical line of global environmental policy and India's role in sustainable practices, provides a comprehensive understanding of the critical challenges and opportunities for sustainable development. This paper highlights the milestones that have defined environmental governance such as the 1972 Stockholm Conference, the 1987 Montreal Protocol, and the 2015 Paris Agreement are analysed to understand their impacts on global environmental policy and their significance in the fight against climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental challenges.

Keywords: environmental policy, Stockholm Conference , Paris Agreement

The development of global environmental policy is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history. While local efforts to manage natural resources and prevent pollution date back centuries, it wasn't until the latter half of the 20th century that international cooperation became necessary due to the scale of industrialization and the increasing understanding of transboundary environmental issues. This paper explores the historical context and evolution of environmental policy, with a focus on key international agreements that have shaped the global approach to addressing environmental challenges. While environmental degradation has been recognized for centuries, it was primarily seen as a local or regional issue. For instance, early conservation laws, such as those protecting forests in 18th-century Europe, were aimed at preserving resources for future use rather than preventing ecological destruction. Industrialization in the 19th century and the subsequent increase in pollution, however, led to early governmental regulations like the British Clean Air Act of 1956, which aimed to curb urban pollution following the London smog disaster. International environmental agreements are treaties negotiated, signed, and ratified by individual nation-states to address transboundary environmental issues¹.

The 1972 Stockholm Conference: The Birth of Modern Environmental Policy

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm Conference) is widely regarded as the starting point for global environmental policy. This was the first major international gathering that explicitly addressed environmental issues on a global scale². The conference resulted in the

Stockholm Declaration, which established principles for sustainable development and emphasized the importance of balancing economic growth with environmental protection³. It also led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), a critical body for coordinating global environmental efforts.

The Stockholm Conference marked a shift in how environmental issues were viewed—not just as local problems but as global ones requiring global cooperation. This laid the groundwork for future environmental agreements and set the stage for environmental policy to become an integral part of international diplomacy.

The 1987 Montreal Protocol: A Model of Success

One of the most successful environmental agreements in history, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987), demonstrated the potential for effective international cooperation. Scientific discoveries in the 1970s and 1980s had revealed that chemicals such as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) were causing the depletion of the ozone layer, which protects life on Earth from harmful ultraviolet radiation. The Montreal Protocol was groundbreaking because it established binding commitments for countries to phase out the production and consumption of ozone-depleting substances⁴. Through regular amendments and updates, the protocol has been remarkably successful, leading to the near-total elimination of CFCs and the gradual recovery of the ozone layer. The protocol is often cited as a model for addressing other global environmental issues, particularly climate change, because of its scientific basis, enforceable measures, and ability to adapt over time.

The 1992 Earth Summit and the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio Earth Summit) was another pivotal moment in environmental policy⁵. The summit resulted in several important agreements, most notably the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC⁶), which established the framework for future international negotiations on climate change. The Rio Earth Summit also introduced the concept of sustainable development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This principle became central to environmental policymaking and remains a guiding force in global governance today. The UNFCCC, while not binding in its initial form, created the platform for subsequent climate agreements, most notably the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015). The Kyoto Protocol was the first international treaty to set legally binding emissions reduction targets for developed countries, though it faced challenges in implementation and enforcement.

The Paris Agreement: A New Era in Climate Policy

The Paris Agreement (2015) represents the most comprehensive international effort to tackle climate change. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement includes commitments from both developed and developing countries, recognizing the global nature of the climate crisis. Its central aim is to limit global temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with an aspirational goal of limiting the increase to 1.5°C. The Paris Agreement introduced the concept of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), whereby countries submit their own climate action plans based on their capabilities and circumstances. While the agreement is not legally binding in terms of emissions targets, it includes mechanisms for transparency, accountability, and the regular updating of commitments. The Paris

Agreement is seen as a landmark achievement in global environmental policy, as it reflects a consensus among nearly all nations that climate change is a critical issue requiring immediate action. However, the agreement also highlights ongoing challenges, such as securing adequate financial support for developing countries and ensuring that all nations meet their commitments.

Challenges and Future Directions in Global Environmental Policy

Despite the progress made through these key agreements, global environmental policy faces significant challenges. The implementation gap—the difference between commitments made and actions taken—remains a persistent issue. Additionally, geopolitical tensions, economic inequalities, and differing national interests complicate efforts to achieve global consensus on environmental issues. Looking ahead, future environmental policy will need to address emerging challenges such as biodiversity loss, ocean degradation, and the environmental impacts of new technologies. Furthermore, the intersection of environmental justice and social inequality must become a central focus of international agreements, as vulnerable populations often bear the brunt of environmental degradation and climate change.

The evolution of global environmental policy reflects the growing recognition that environmental issues are not confined by national borders and require collective action. Key agreements like the Stockholm Declaration, Montreal Protocol, and Paris Agreement have played crucial roles in shaping global efforts to address environmental challenges. While significant progress has been made, much work remains to be done to ensure a sustainable future. Continued international cooperation, scientific innovation, and strong political will are essential for overcoming the environmental challenges of the 21st century.

¹ Jason F. Shogren(ed), *Encyclopaedia of Energy, Natural Resource, and Environmental Economics*, 2013.

² Michele M. Betsill and Elisabeth Corell, eds., *NGO Diplomacy: The influence of Nongovernmental Organizations in International Environmental Negotiations* (2008), p. viii.

³ Sohn, Louis B., and John E. Noyes. *Basic Documents of International Environmental Law*, vol. 1, Transnational Publishers, 1992, p.23.

⁴ Andersen, Stephen O., K. Madhava Sarma, and Kristen N. Taddonio. *Technology Transfer for the Ozone Layer: Lessons for Climate Change*, Earthscan, 2007.

⁵ McCormick, John. *The Global Environmental Movement*, 2nd ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 1995, p.8.

⁶ Bodansky, Daniel, Jutta Brunnée, and Lavanya Rajamani. *International Climate Change Law*, Oxford University Press, 2017.