Global environmental institutions

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This chapter reviews research on the interaction between the European Union (EU) and international environmental institutions. After an overview of the EU’s role in global environmental governance, we analyse the literature on this interaction in two steps. First, we highlight the various subjects/themes studied before presenting, secondly, the theoretical approaches and concepts that have been used to study these subjects and themes. Attention is paid to the foundations of the literature (do research questions stem from a certain normative perspective?), research methods employed (quantitative or qualitative? single or comparative case study approaches?) and the findings (do some findings contradict each other? what is their degree of generalisability to other areas of EU external action?). To conclude, the chapter suggests avenues for future research, based on gaps that have become apparent in the analysis of the existing literature.

Overview of the EU’s role in global environmental governance

A broad and diverse network of organisations, institutions, agreements, and global conferences characterises global environmental governance. To start with, a number of UN conferences have provided important milestones in the evolution of global environmental governance. In 1972, the first major global conference addressing the environmental challenge, the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, marked the starting point of the rise of the environment in international politics. Environmental issues moved to the top of the international political agenda in the late 1980s as a result of growing scientific evidence on and concern about transboundary environmental problems such as acid rain and ozone layer depletion. In this context the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the so-called Rio Earth Summit, heralded the high time of global environmental governance through the adoption of the Agenda 21 – a blueprint for sustainable development – the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Statement on Forest Principles, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Ten years after UNCED another World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was held in Johannesburg in 2002, focusing on implementation. The next summit, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (or: Rio+20 Conference) has taken place in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012.
There are three overarching institutions in the field of global environmental governance that deal with a broad range of environmental issue-areas: the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). UNEP was established in 1972, resulting from the 1972 Stockholm Conference, as the main UN body addressing environmental issues. In the period 2010–13, ten EU member states are among the 58 members of the UNEP Governing Council whom the UN General Assembly elects for a period of four years.\(^1\) The CSD was established in 1992 by the UN General Assembly as a functional commission of the UN Economic and Social Committee to ensure the effective follow-up of UNCED and its Agenda 21. Its 53 members, each serving a three-year term, include around eight EU member states each term.\(^2\) The GEF, established in 1991, is an independent financial organisation that is the largest source of funding for projects in developing countries and countries with economies in transition that benefit the global environment. It has 182 members (including all EU member states except for Cyprus). The GEF also serves as the financial mechanism for the CBD, the UNFCCC, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).\(^3\)

Various other international organisations also contribute to environmental governance. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) stimulates sustainable development, thus promoting the protection of the environment on the way to economic development, and supports the Millennium Development Goals, including the reduction of environmental degradation. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) addresses, among other things, agriculture, forests and fisheries. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) deals with the atmosphere and climate, and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) combats marine pollution by ships. This list is by no means exclusive.

Next to these organisations and institutions, there is a multiplicity of issue-area specific Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). Estimations of the exact amount vary from several hundred up to 1,000 MEAs. There is no agreement on the exact number of MEAs that exist, depending on what is considered ‘multilateral’ and ‘environmental’ and whether treaties and amendments of treaties are counted as separate agreements or not. According to the widely used database of Ronald Mitchell (who counts agreements, amendments, declarations and protocols), there are now more than 1,000 MEAs.\(^4\) This number includes both global MEAs that are open to all states (like the UNFCCC and the CBD) and regional MEAs that only apply in a certain region such as Europe (e.g. the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution and the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats). Like these, several regional European MEAs are associated with the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Council of Europe. In addition, there are free standing MEAs such as the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North–East Atlantic known as the ‘OSPAR Convention’ with 15 states and the EU as members. Besides these MEAs, finally a large amount of bilateral agreements on the environment exists (e.g. the 1979 EU-Senegal fishing agreement). Ronald Mitchell’s database provides more than 1,300 of such agreements for the period 1950–2008.
Since the late 1970s, the EU – still called the European Community at that time – has increasingly become itself a party to MEAs. The possibility for the EU to participate in MEAs was created through the special formula of a ‘regional economic integration organization’ (REIO). This special formula was invented to allow the EC to become a party to the 1979 Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP). The EU has since, as a REIO, become a party to many global MEAs including the 1985 Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and its 1987 Montreal Protocol, the 1989 Basel Convention on hazardous wastes, the 1992 UNFCCC and its 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the 1992 CBD and its 2000 Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the 1994 Convention to Combat Desertification, the 1998 Rotterdam and 2001 Stockholm Conventions on chemicals, along with many regional European MEAs.

Consequently, a substantial part of current EU environmental measures results from MEAs in which the EU participates, concerning a wide range of issues including, among others, the atmosphere, transboundary impacts, animals and habitats, marine pollution, hazardous wastes, climate change, biodiversity, fisheries and more (Vogler, 1999: 25). At the same time, internal implementation of international treaty obligations can be considered a part of EU action in the field of global environmental governance that affects the EU’s credibility vis-à-vis its international partners (Vogler, 2005: 835).

Whereas the EU could be a party to an MEA without any individual member state being a party, most MEAs are ‘mixed agreements’, i.e. both the EU and its member states are parties to them. This ‘mixity’ reflects that competences regarding the issues covered by individual MEAs are typically shared between the EU and its member states (even though the dividing lines may neither be clear nor stable). As a result, the EU and its member states need to coordinate their at times diverging interests in order to be able to take joint decisions and ‘speak with one voice’ in unity. Arrangements for internal coordination and external representation can thus be quite burdensome and can beg the question of the extent to which the EU can be considered an actor in its own right as opposed to a set of member states in cases of mixed or shared competences (Vogler, 1999).

As Bretherton and Vogler (2006: 89) put it: ‘In contrast with its role as a world trading power, the Union’s rise to prominence in global environmental politics was unforeseen.’ Even though environmental policy is, unlike trade policy, not an exclusive EU competence, the EU has become a prominent player and even a ‘leader’ in global environmental politics (e.g. Sbragia and Damro, 1999; Zito, 2005; Oberthür, 2009). The EU has been found to have exerted leadership not only in the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol (see the chapter by Louise van Schaik), but also in the CBD and other MEAs. Furthermore, the Union has also been portrayed as a propagator and disseminator of certain environmental norms – like the precautionary principle, which contributed to, among others, the creation of a biosafety regime – and as a staunch supporter of sustainable development (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006). Accordingly, prominent theoretical perspectives on the EU’s role in international environmental governance include the concepts of leadership, green normative power Europe and more recently also the concept of EU effectiveness/performance. We return to these perspectives in the next section.

The state of the art

In this section, we highlight various subjects/themes studied in the literature and present prominent theoretical approaches and concepts that have been employed to study these subjects and themes. In doing so, we also review any normative foundation, the research methods used, the consistency and generalisability of the findings of the literature and apparent research gaps.
Subjects/themes studied in the literature

A first important strand of the literature analyses the role of the EU in global environmental governance in general (as opposed to its role in specific MEAs or other international fora) (e.g. Jupille and Caporaso, 1998; Vogler, 1999; Sbragia, 2002; Bretherton and Vogler, 2003 and 2006; Vogler and Stephan, 2007). Written from a foreign policy perspective, these studies highlight important developments in the coming into being and maturing of the EU as an actor in global environmental governance since the 1970s and especially highlight the EU’s achievements and track-record in this respect. They are frequently based on specific criteria and conceptual approaches that are often linked to the concept of *actorness* (see also the sub-section below). Sbragia (2002) does not only focus on the process of the EU gaining power to act internationally, but also explores the reaction of the existing players in the international system to the EU’s demands for participation at the international level. Other authors (Jupille and Caporaso, 1998; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006) address this aspect by including ‘external recognition’ in the list of criteria proposed to assess the EU’s ability to act in the international arena. Most of these analyses draw on selected empirical examples for illustration, but are not based on a systematic structured comparison of EU participation in all MEAs or a cross-section of them. However, Vogler (2003) offers an overview of the extent and modes of EU participation in various MEAs and Oberthür (2000) analyses the role of the EU in negotiating five environmental regimes.

Some authors have studied the role of the EU in particular MEAs. For example, Oberthür (1999) analysed the EU’s role in the creation and development of the Montreal Protocol for the protection of the ozone layer, using the themes of EU performance, leadership and implementation. Rhinard and Kaeding (2006) and Falkner (2007) specifically addressed the role of the EU in the establishment of the biosafety regime based on the 2000 Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the CBD. While Rhinard and Kaeding assessed the EU’s international bargaining power in the negotiations on the Protocol, Falkner investigated the EU’s degree of normative power in the biosafety regime. Delreux has used a principal-agent perspective to analyse the EU’s role as a negotiator in eight MEAs, namely: the Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent; the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants; the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters; the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Protocol to the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context; the Kyoto Protocol; the UN Convention to Combat Desertification; the aforementioned Cartagena Protocol; and the African-Eurasian Waterbirds Agreement (Delreux 2011; see also Delreux 2008, 2009 and more articles by the same author).

The role of the EU at key global environmental summits, in particular the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), has also received a fair amount of scholarly attention. Brinkhorst (1994) and Jupille and Caporaso (1998) have investigated the EU’s role at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit in order to draw conclusions regarding the EU’s status as an international player at the UN. Jupille and Caporaso specifically applied their concept of *actorness* in order to assess the EU’s role in global environmental politics. Furthermore, Lightfoot and Burchell (2005) examined the extent to which the EU, as others have argued, played a leadership role at the WSSD in 2002. By using the concept of normative power Europe (like Falkner – see above) they question the extent to which the EU has really demonstrated commitment to sustainable development.

This overview of research on the role of the EU in international environmental institutions reveals significant lacunae as regards empirical coverage. As regards MEAs, scholarly attention...
has focused on some selected issue-areas within global environmental governance. Overall, issue-areas of high politics, such as climate change (see the chapter by Van Schaik), biosafety (i.e. the highly politicised issue of trade in genetically modified organisms), and in the 1990s the ozone regime, have been studied the most. In contrast, the role of the EU as regards numerous MEAs addressing issue-areas that have been less in the political limelight such as marine pollution, desertification, hazardous chemicals and many more have hardly been studied at all. That the amount of academic work seems to increase with the political saliency of an issue also holds regarding other international environmental institutions and fora. Thus, the EU’s role at global environmental summits has been investigated to some extent. In depth studies on the EU’s activities in the CSD or in UNEP, however, have remained lacking, even if Vogler and Stephan (2007) have explored the role of the EU in the CSD and in UNEP to some extent as part of a larger study on the EU’s role in global environmental governance. Similarly, the role of the EU in discussions on reforming UNEP and the system of global environmental governance more broadly, including the proposal to create a World Environment Organisation, remains to be explored in depth. Overall, a research focus (and indeed bias) on issues of high political salience can be considered problematic as regards the generalisability of research results.

In line with this finding, the high-politics theme ‘the EU and sustainable development’ has received a fair amount of scholarly attention (e.g. Lightfoot and Burchell, 2005; Vogler and Stephan, 2007; Bretherton and Vogler, 2008). Questions posed in this literature include: To what extent can the EU be considered a promoter of sustainable development on the international stage? To what extent does the EU integrate environmental policy into other policies such as development policy, economic policy and social policy? Related to this issue of ‘environmental policy integration’, Bretherton and Vogler (2008) investigate the EU’s strategy of ‘Policy Coherence for Development’ to evaluate the actorness of the EU as a sustainable development promoter. Other studies analyse the degree of coherence of EU environmental policy and trade policy (e.g. Bretherton and Vogler, 2000). Related is the question of the extent to which the EU can be considered a green normative power, which we will further pursue in the next sub-section: to what extent does the EU set certain environmental standards within its internal and external policies and to what extent does it actually act in line with these standards itself? Vogler and Stephan (2007) argue that the EU has reacted to sustainable development becoming a global paradigm by, on the one hand, promoting the integration of environmental policy in other EU policy areas, and, on the other hand, strengthening environmental policy itself.

The relationship between the EU member states and the Commission and the Council presidency in the external representation of the EU during international environmental negotiations has also been the subject of a significant amount of scholarly literature (see in particular Delreux, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011). This literature focuses on the internal EU decision-making process concerning the negotiations of MEAs and also addressed the resulting implications for the EU’s performance in these negotiations. The interest in the interaction between the EU member states and EU negotiators (from the Commission, the EU Council presidency, or individual lead countries) relates to the sharing of legal competences concerning MEAs between the EU and its member states. The theme is also prominent in research on international climate agreements, which are mixed agreements as well. Often, these studies use principal-agent theory as their main theoretical perspective, as further discussed in the sub-section below.

Furthermore, the scholarly literature on the EU and global environmental governance has addressed the implementation of MEAs by the EU. This issue has received increased attention especially since the 1990s, when the EU started to become a leading force in various MEAs. Consequently, scholars began to discuss to what extent the EU could be seen as an international leader, whether it could stay in a leading position in the future and which factors might impede
EU influence in MEAs. Scholars investigated the EU’s record of implementing MEAs in EU legislation against the backdrop of its importance for the international credibility of the EU (see e.g. Sbragia with Hildebrand, 1998; Jordan, 1999; Oberthür, 1999), which has remained a significant concern and factor affecting the EU’s performance and leadership in MEAs. In 2007 Perkins and Neumayer carried out a quantitative analysis of the implementation of MEAs within the EU to explain variation in implementation records among the EU member states. Their statistical findings indicate that, among others, states with a higher pollution load seem to have a worse implementation record, that more powerful member states are more likely to ignore the obligations of MEAs and that member states with a population that is favourable to European integration are more likely to implement MEA obligations in legislation (Perkins and Neumayer, 2007: 31).

Finally, scholars have compared the roles of the EU and the United States in international environmental politics (Sbragia and Damro, 1999; Kelemen and Vogel, 2009). Kelemen and Vogel (2009), for example, try to explain why, as of 2009, the EU is a leader in many MEAs and why the US is not. They argue that the leading role of the EU in, among others, the UN climate change regime (cf. the chapter by van Schaik) can be explained by reference to the influence of domestic politics in the EU member states (domestic political pressure from the public, environmental and industrial lobby groups to promote certain environmental norms at the international level) and the concept of regulatory competition (a state supports an MEA if the MEA creates benefits for domestic producers in terms of setting regulatory standards).

Theoretical approaches and concepts

It has already become clear in passing from the overview presented in the previous sub-section that various concepts have been used to study the EU’s role in international environmental institutions. In the following, we address these conceptual approaches and the related findings in more detail.

A first conceptual lens on the EU in global environmental politics has focused on the emergence and maturing of the EU as an actor in this area of international affairs. Relevant studies have found the EU’s ability to act to have grown gradually over a longer period of time. Concepts that have been employed in this respect are actorness and presence. Coined by Allen and Smith (1990: 21), the concept of presence focuses on the (perceived) ability of the EU to operate in order to influence the actions and expectations of other participants. Actorness takes presence a step further in that it implies a larger scope for EU action and emphasises the EU’s ability to function actively and deliberately in international politics. Building on these concepts, scholars have analysed the role of the EU in global environmental politics (sometimes as one of several areas) to further advance the conceptual understanding of EU foreign policy and external relations across various issue-areas and policy fields, and thus to make generalisations about the status of the EU as a global actor at a given point in time. For example, Jupille and Caporaso (1998), in their seminal conceptualisation of EU international actorness, introduced four different variables to measure the degree of EU actor capacity in international politics in a specific case: recognition, authority, autonomy and cohesion. They applied and illustrated this concept to EU participation in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. They argued that the EU has displayed considerable actor capacity in terms of recognition and authority, but that the more political criteria of autonomy and cohesion have been more difficult to achieve. Subsequently, Bretherton and Vogler (2006) devised a concept for assessing the EU’s ability to act in world politics, which they also applied to the area of global environmental politics. Making use of a broader set of criteria than Jupille and Caporaso, they take into account opportunity structure (the external structure of opportunities surrounding the EU), presence and capability.
Since the 1990s, several scholars have furthermore argued that the EU can be considered an international environmental leader and have thus employed the concept of international leadership (see e.g. Sbragia and Damro, 1999; Zito, 2005; Oberthür, 2009). In the literature on international leadership (in the context of multilateral negotiations), it is common to distinguish three modes of leadership (see discussion with further references in Grubb and Gupta, 2000 and Skodvin and Andresen, 2006). First, structural leadership, coercive leadership or ‘sticks and carrots’ refer to the use of positive and negative incentives based on military and economic power. Second, entrepreneurial leadership, instrumental leadership or problem-solving refers to the ability of an actor to build structures and to apply diplomatic means in order to create winning coalitions. Third, an actor exerting intellectual leadership, unilateral leadership or directional leadership uses ideas and domestic tools to influence the perception of other countries. Interestingly, several of the relevant conceptual contributions have been made by scholars with a strong background in the analysis of global and European environmental politics (in addition to the aforementioned: Oran Young, Arild Underdal).

What have been the more specific findings with respect to international environmental leadership by the EU then? Zito (2005) distinguishes four significant EU global leadership roles, namely: the EU’s global role as a negotiator of international agreements, as a creator of innovative solutions to complex global policy problems, as a leading market power, and as a teacher and/or model for other actors by offering insights and experiences at international fora. It is easy to see the close correlation with the aforementioned general modes or types of leadership. Building on the leadership modes by Young and others discussed above, Oberthür (2009: 194) mentions two fundamental requirements of leadership. First, a leader has to have the capacity to exert significant influence on other actors. Second, leadership is relative in the sense that the leading actor has to be more progressive than the followers in pursuing a collective goal. Although the EU seems to have met these criteria, EU leadership has frequently not been very effective. In particular, it failed to ensure the collective goal of environmental sustainability. An actor can thus, conceptually as well as empirically, be a leader without being effective. Oberthür (2009: 195–96) furthermore argues that directional leadership (‘leadership by example’), ‘based on the non-confrontational means of diplomacy, persuasion and argumentation’, has been particularly prominent in the EU’s efforts to advance international environmental regimes.

Bretherton and Vogler (2006: 103) acknowledge that the concept of leadership has a number of different meanings, as reflected in the aforementioned conceptual leadership categories. Accordingly, EU leadership ‘is associated with rule and dominance and with the Union’s presence and negotiating strength in multilateral environmental regimes’ but may also mean ‘to guide, to go ahead or even to inspire’. They furthermore argue that the EU has four different roles as a leader in global environmental governance: architect of sustainable development, normative actor, participant in global governance regimes and leader in the politics of climate change, in which all these aspects of leadership are present.

Third, and related to the concept of leadership, the concepts of effectiveness and performance have been in increasing use in the analysis of the EU’s role in international environmental institutions. In comparison with the leadership concept, performance and effectiveness put more emphasis on actual results than on negotiating behaviour. In accordance with Laatikainen and Smith (2006), we may distinguish between internal effectiveness (which relates to the EU’s internal system of coordination and decision-making) and external effectiveness (which relates to the Union’s ability to achieve its objectives within the UN/international institutions and its relations with the UN). Several studies have used effectiveness as a criterion of the assessment of the EU’s role in international environmental institutions. For example, Damro (2006) has provided an assessment of the EU’s effectiveness as an actor at the UN relating to the environment in cases of shared legal
competences between the EU and its member states. As mentioned, Oberthür (2009) has linked effectiveness with leadership, investigating the success of the EU’s leadership in the area of global environmental politics. Accordingly, EU leadership is effective if the EU is successful in mobilising available resources (power, legitimacy/credibility, knowledge and skills) to achieve outcomes that help reach the collective goal (environmental sustainability). These contributions also aim to identify key factors that affect the success/effectiveness of the EU in achieving its goals, including, among others, international context factors, internal interests and interest homogeneity, the domestic implementation of the MEA in question, coordination of policy across different domains (coherence of policies and environmental policy integration in other domains), the organisation of external policy coordination and representation, and outreach towards third parties during international negotiations.

Performance can be considered a slightly broader concept than effectiveness, which it may encompass. While an assessment of the effectiveness of the EU in international environmental institutions may thus form part of an assessment of its performance, the latter allows an application of a broader set of evaluative criteria. For example, aspects of efficiency (costs incurred for any effects achieved) may enter the equation, as may the success of the EU in being or becoming relevant for its key stakeholders (primarily the member states) and/or its ability to produce legitimate, transparent and accepted external policy decisions. The concept of performance is thus also more open than that of effectiveness and needs to be carefully defined by researchers when applying it. A fixed set of performance criteria does so far not exist, and few studies have systematically advanced such a broader performance assessment as regards the role of the EU in international environmental institutions (see Jørgensen et al., 2011).

Fourth, the broader concept of normative power has been employed in the field. Ian Manners coined this concept in 2002, arguing that the EU acts in international relations by means of ideas and values rather than military or economic force. Normative power may thus be related to the concept of directional leadership (see above). As regards international environmental politics, scholars have debated the extent to which the EU can be considered a green normative power promoting environmental values and sustainable development, as might be suggested by its support for global environmental regulation and sustainable development. However, scholars have found rather negative results when they assessed the EU’s degree of normative power in the area of global environmental governance. For example, Falkner (2007) has argued that, in a political-economic perspective, the normative power concept has significant shortcomings since: it does not pay attention to the historical record of EU environmental policy; it confuses the export of domestic norms with the promotion of universal values; it does not incorporate the domestic interests that lead to the internationalisation of EU regulation; and it does not acknowledge the discordance between several values and norms within the EU’s identity. Similarly, Kelemen (2009) emphasises the self-serving character of efforts of the EU to ‘globalise’ its internal environmental regulation by means of international agreements: by pressuring others to adopt the same regulation as itself, the EU hopes to legitimise its own rules on a global scale. This contrasts with promoting universal values, as a true normative actor would do. In their analysis of the role of the EU at the 2002 WSSD, Lightfoot and Burchell (2005) argue that the EU was not able to adopt the norm of sustainable development in a coherent way, reducing its credibility as a green normative power. Lenschow and Sprungk (2010) even talk about ‘the myth of a green Europe’. They argue that the EU uses its green image as a brand attitude to present itself in a positive way to the European and global public to create higher degrees of legitimacy and identification.

Fifth and finally, principal-agent theory has been used to analyse the relationship between the EU institutions in negotiations of MEAs. As mentioned before, Tom Delreux has investigated
the EU’s internal decision-making process concerning international environmental negotiations and thus under conditions of shared competence (see e.g. Delreux, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011). He uses the principal-agent approach to analyse and clarify the complicated relationship between the Union and its member states in this process: as the principals, the member states delegate tasks to the agent, the EU negotiator (the EU Council Presidency, the Commission, or a lead country), namely to act on their behalf during international environmental negotiations. Delreux has, among other things, studied the mechanisms that EU member states use to control the EU negotiators in this process. One of his key conclusions on the particular way in which the EU participates in mixed agreements is that EU member states and EU institutions having homogeneous preferences is one of the preconditions for EU effectiveness, which corresponds with findings regarding the EU’s participation in the climate change regime (cf. the chapter by van Schaik).

**Avenues for future research**

The state of the art discussed above opens up a rich research agenda that provides ample room for advancing our understanding of the role of the EU in international environmental governance. To start with, there is much scope for broadening the reach of empirical research to cover in particular also issues of lower political saliency. So far, the major emphasis has been on the analysis of the role of the EU with respect to high-profile MEAs such as the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol, as well as at major environment summits such as the Rio Earth Summit or the WSSD. Other institutions and fora have been neglected. For example, the role of the EU in international discussions on reforming global environmental governance, including proposals for a World Environment Organisation and for reforming UNEP, has received scant scholarly attention (see Vogler and Stephan, 2007). Similarly, the interaction between the EU and the vast number of MEAs of lower political salience (on chemicals management, desertification, marine pollution, etc.) remains under-explored. As it stands, research has only painted a partial picture of the EU as an international environmental actor. Not least, investigating a broader range of international environmental institutions would enable us to find out to what extent current research findings are determined by the existing selection bias in favour of high-politics areas.

Furthermore, two kinds of comparative studies promise particularly significant returns on investment. First, comparative analyses of the role of the EU in different international environmental regimes and/or organisations (or even including non-environmental regimes and/or organisations) have remained a rare exemption (but see Delreux, 2011). Appropriately designed, such studies would enhance the generalisability of knowledge across the field and generally boost our confidence in the reliability of the findings. Second, studies that would systematically compare the role of the EU as regards environmental institutions with that of other actors (beyond the US) hold considerable promise. They may provide insights in which mechanisms have proven successful more broadly in an increasingly multipolar world and would enable us to investigate which features of the interaction between the EU and international environmental institutions are specific to the Union and due to its particularities.

The potential of the broader research agenda addressing the performance of the EU with respect to international environmental institutions also deserves highlighting. While the EU’s effectiveness in achieving its goals will no doubt remain an important yardstick also in future studies, the exploration of the EU’s performance enables us to apply further yardsticks such as efficiency, accountability, relevance, outreach to other parties, etc. as well as broader EU goals such as the functioning of multilateralism or enhancing the EU’s influence in the world in more general. Part of this research agenda may be the question of how the EU can and should adapt
to a changing international context, especially the rise of the emerging economies. Due to the openness of the concept of performance, care needs to be taken to clearly define and delimit it for the purpose of individual studies in order to avoid confusion.

Outside-in studies of the impact of MEAs and international environmental organisations on the EU internally, thus turning around the mainstream perspective on EU performance and impact, constitutes another interesting avenue for future research. Studies on the implementation of international environmental obligations in the EU and its member states provide an important starting point for such an outside-in perspective and can be pushed further (e.g. by investigating the degree of variation of the implementation record of different member states). However, the impact of international environmental institutions on the EU deserves to be explored beyond issues of pure implementation. It may, for example, be felt in the framing of knowledge, policies and policy instruments and could even find its expression in internal institutional arrangements in the EU. Linked to this issue, the influence of multinational companies, NGOs and other external transnational actors on the EU’s decision-making in international environmental politics may also be a fruitful subject of future research.

A wealth of other issues related to the interaction between the EU and international environmental institutions deserve scholarly attention. For example, research on the interaction between the Commission, the Council, and the Parliament as regards international environmental institutions; the EU’s relationship with emerging economies and other (groups of) countries in MEAs/Regimes/Organisations; the repercussions of the EU’s role in global environmental governance on the global image of the EU, and other subjects may all deliver important input into academic and policy debates. Given the scope of possible subjects, we cannot attempt to present a comprehensive research agenda here.

A final issue that deserves specific mentioning concerns the consequences of the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009. The EU gaining legal personality, the increase of decision-making by qualified majority voting, the bigger role for the European Parliament in the adoption of international treaties, the establishment of the European External Action Services and modified arrangements for the representation of the EU in international institutions/organisations – as the effects of these changes are materialising (and the practice of their implementation evolves), they can and should be investigated empirically in the years to come. Future studies can thus investigate the real-life effect of those changes on the EU’s role in international environmental politics.

Notes
1 Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain; see www.unep.org/resources/gov/overview.asp, August 2011.
3 See www.thegef.org/gef/whatisgef, August 2011.
5 With the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009, the EU replaced the European Community as a party to MEAs.

References


