

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Earth System Governance

journal homepage: www.sciencedirect.com/journal/earth-system-governance

Global environmental agreement-making: Upping the methodological and ethical stakes of studying negotiations

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords

Agreement-making
Global environmental negotiations
Methodology
Ethnography
Ethics
Social order
COVID-19

ABSTRACT

This perspective identifies how recent advances contribute to re-evaluating and re-constructing global environmental negotiations as a research object by calling into question who constitutes an actor and what constitutes a site of agreement formation. Building on this scholarship, we offer the term agreement-making to facilitate further methodological and ethical reflection. The term agreement-making broadens the conceptualisation of the actors, sites and processes constitutive of global environmental agreements and brings to the fore how these are shaped by, reflect and have the potential to re-make or transform the intertwined global order of social, political and economic relations. Agreement-making situates research within these processes, and we suggest that enhancing the methodological diversity and practical utility is a potential avenue for challenging the reproduction of academic dominance. We highlight how COVID-19 requires further adapting research practices and offers an opportunity to question whether we need to be physically present to provide critical insight, analysis and support.

1. Introduction

Recent scholarship in global environmental politics makes apparent

the importance of researchers gaining access to and observing global environmental negotiations in order to understand the power relations that shape the final agreement (Campbell et al., 2014a; Ciplet et al.,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2021.100121>

Received 15 April 2021; Received in revised form 29 September 2021; Accepted 27 October 2021

Available online 4 November 2021

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2015; Dimitrov 2010). As more scholars collect data at intergovernmental meetings and global mega-events, the need to develop new methodological approaches to capture the dynamics within and among these sites has become apparent (Corson et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2019). In this article, we identify how new developments in the field contribute to re-evaluating and re-constructing environmental negotiations as a broader set of actors, sites and processes that shape global environmental agreements. We build on this scholarship and offer the term *agreement-making* to facilitate further methodological and ethical reflection in the study of global environmental negotiations. Critically, by introducing the notion of agreement-making we want to facilitate the study of order-making as central to future research.

We define agreement-making as *the multiple actors, sites and processes through which environmental agreements are made, and the new sets and arrangements of actors, sites and processes that are created by any specific agreement, which have the potential to reinforce or reorient the global political order*. Building on existing scholarship, we offer this re-conceptualisation to further shift the study of environmental negotiations in four related directions. First, to broaden the conceptualisation of global environmental agreements to the actors, sites and interconnections beyond formal negotiations and to focus on the processes of formation alongside the outcome. Second, to highlight that all agreements are shaped by and have the potential to *re-make* the global political order of relations and that this focus on order-making needs to become more central to future scholarship. Third, to identify whether methodological advances combined with shifts in negotiation practices initiated by COVID-19 require us to 'be there' to study agreement-making. And finally, to situate research and the researcher within these agreement-making processes and explore how a focus on the *practical utility* of critical scholarship may offer a potential avenue for challenging the reproduction of academic and cultural dominance.

2. From specific agreements to global political order-making

Advances in understanding of global environmental negotiations, from the intimate intergovernmental meeting to the mega-event of UN climate conferences and sustainable development summits, have been significant and have accelerated over the past two decades. (Aykut et al., 2017; Constantinou 1998; Campbell et al., 2014a; Chasek 2001; Ciplet et al., 2015; Corson et al., 2019; Craggs and Mahony 2014; Death 2011; Depledge 2004; Doran 1993; Gray et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2019; Miller 1995). New methodological approaches have been applied to and arisen from scholarly attempts to grapple with the increasing number and complexity of global environmental meetings. In many instances, the understandings that have emerged have been built upon direct observation of these events, which has challenged conventional wisdom in the discipline of International Relations, particularly around ideas of which actors matter. Through careful documentation, this scholarship has evidenced the role and influence of secretariats and chairs (Bauer 2006; Bridge and Perreault, 2009; Depledge 2007; Jinnah 2014), NGOs (Betsill and Corell 2001; Corell and Betsill 2001), scientific actors (Haas 1989; Litfin 1994), Indigenous and marginalised groups (Schroeder 2010; Marion Suseeya 2014; Marion Suseeya and Zanotti 2019; Reimerson 2013; Wallbott 2014; Witter et al., 2015), and youth movements (Thew 2018) in forging environmental agreements.

This research illuminates that the power asymmetries of negotiation sites, far from completely excluding or diminishing the voice of marginalised actors, generate novel and evolving movements and strategies to shape the global response to environmental degradation (Ciplet et al., 2015). Thus, Indigenous Peoples alongside other groups of non-governmental actors have contributed to the transformation of spaces considered outside the conventional negotiating space, including side events and exhibits (Hjerpe and Linnér 2010; Schroeder and Lovell 2012), press conferences, corridors and even virtual spaces, resourcefully creating opportunities to raise issues and exert pressure with measured effect (Betsill and Corell 2001; Marion Suseeya et al., 2021).

Scholarship has also challenged how we conceptualise global environmental negotiations and the expert processes that inform them. Observation of meetings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) identifies the similarities in the actors and conduct of proceedings between global scientific processes and the conventions they inform (Hughes and Vadrot 2019; De Pryck, 2020). This further challenges what is conceptualised as 'outside' of negotiations, as intergovernmental approval sessions of IPCC and IPBES summary for policymakers become a site where the struggle over some objects begins or is successfully deferred (Hughes and Vadrot 2019).

The need to situate this wider range of actors and sites of negotiation, and to analyse their overall role, relationship, and significance in global environmental governance has led scholars to think in terms of networks, complexity, and assemblages (Corson et al., 2019; Keohane and Victor 2011; Orsini et al., 2020; Pickering 2019). Scholars have conceptualised meetings as single nodes within a network (Campbell 2014a), as sites where networks assemble (Corson et al., 2019), and as sites embedded in complex governance structures (Pickering 2019). This re-conceptualisation of meeting sites and spaces has been central in advancing understanding of global environmental negotiations. Thinking in terms of assemblages, nodes, networks, and complexity have made it possible to situate actors, treaties, and organisations in broader patterns of governing relations and arrangements. However, analysis of the relationship between global environmental agreements and the global social, political and economic order of relations has remained neglected, and we argue the concept of agreement-making can help address this gap.

Environmental negotiations are situated within and reflect the order of relations between global actors, as shaped by the distribution of economic, political and social resources. Each instance of *making* an agreement is built upon and has the potential to reproduce the distribution of the resources in the room, as a reflection of the distribution in the world beyond the negotiations. This relationship has been highlighted in scholarship examining the social order of author teams within the IPCC (Hughes and Paterson, 2017), struggles over the forms of knowledge authorised through particular concepts in IPBES (Hughes and Vadrot, 2019), and contestation over the Common Heritage of Humankind principle in intergovernmental negotiations establishing a new marine biodiversity treaty (Vadrot et al., 2021a). We want to build on and extend this scholarship by suggesting that we can identify each instance of agreement-making as an attempt to maintain or disrupt global political and economic arrangements through the decisions in the text and the actions these create. Through the term *agreement-making*, we want to draw scholarly attention to the fact that we are not simply observing collective action to prevent or remediate environmental damage, we are also observing and need to capture and document the struggle to maintain or re-make world order through these attempts to govern the environment (Bridge and Perrault 2009).

At the same time, through the study of agreement-making, we aim to broaden the scholarly gaze beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of formal negotiations. Existing scholarship makes clear that struggles to obtain a voice in agreement-making processes have widened the sites and strategies of participation. We suggest that it is no longer legitimate to claim that an agreement has been made by the most important states behind closed doors. While attempts at this kind of *cooperation* are made (Dimitrov 2010), evidence indicates this depends on wider acceptance and legitimation (Ciplet et al., 2015). Even when texts are crafted by the most powerful, agreements are shaped by the scientific objects that become embedded within them (Campbell et al., 2014b), and the actors and activities outside their formal negotiation, including in the corridors, at side events, in booths, at protests, press conferences, and social media interactions. As researchers, we are faced with a proliferation in actors, sites and interactions to analyse in order to understand how and when global political order is constituted and re-made through these global environmental agreement-making activities. Furthermore, as the

shift to virtual negotiations in response to COVID highlights, we are studying a research object that is in constant motion – responding to global crises and events that unfold, and which may increase in frequency as climate stability and environmental conditions continue to erode. Thus, studying these newly framed practices of agreement-making requires we build on and continue to adapt, develop and innovate on existing research practice.

3. Methodological approaches to agreement-making

Much of the research sketched above, out of which we develop the concept of agreement-making, has been enabled and driven by methodological developments in global environmental scholarship. For example, the use of network perspectives and related metaphors has in part arisen because of the apparent fit of this imagery with the density of actors and interactions observable at negotiation sites, and in part because of the increased use of Social Network Analysis (SNA) to capture and analyse these (Allan 2021; Hadden 2015; Paterson 2019). It is also a product of the increasing practice of ethnography and collaboration – approaches to research that are demanded by the sheer size, proliferation, and complexity of global environmental negotiations (Vadrot 2020).

Ethnography has been vital for challenging theories of who, what, and where environmental action takes place. Participant observation of global environmental negotiations encompasses a spectrum from the full immersion of working professionally alongside negotiating actors i.e. within a secretariat or on a delegation, to observing as a researcher and interviewing participants. From these varied levels of proximity and assimilation, scholars have gained unique insights into organising and attaining international agreement. This knowledge often exposes the inadequacy of dominant conceptions of power and requires developing new approaches to model, explain, and describe the complex reality and interconnections observed (Betsill and Corell 2001; Chasek 2001; Hughes and Vadrot 2019; Jinnah 2014; Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti 2019; Thew et al., 2020; Vadrot 2014). The value of the in-depth knowledge gained often has wider practical application beyond the discipline, particularly for the actors studied, a point we return to below.

For the researcher, intimate knowledge of single intersecting moments – comprised of actors, organisations, or processes – raises new questions about the relation of the research problem to other sites within the global environmental governance landscape. From a critical standpoint, gauging the extent and operation of power and dominance over all sites and processes – the existence of economic, social, and political order and its effects – requires connecting together individual moments and cases. However, this is difficult to achieve without comparable processes of research practice and knowledge acquisition, and the investment in time and resources that this requires. An interesting development in this regard has been the emergence of Collaborative Event Ethnography (CEE).

CEE attempts to overcome the limitations of ethnography identified above by conducting *team* ethnography, and establishes a shared methodological practice among researchers to underpin this collaborative undertaking (Campbell 2014a; Corson et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). The advantages to this are manifold. First, by distributing team members across conference venues it enables scholars to follow multiple processes simultaneously. Second, by creating a shared theoretical framework that guides observation and interviews (Campbell 2014a; Gray et al., 2020), as well as a shared practice for recording and documenting observations (Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2020), CEE facilitates the comparability of the documented material. Third, it brings the practice of collaboration into focus (Gray et al., 2020; Foyer et al., 2017). In the study of power asymmetries, CEE has proven critical for facilitating more fine-grained accounts of how these imprint on negotiated text, and the strategies used by marginalised actors to influence proceedings over time (Doolittle 2010; Scott et al. 2015; Witter et al., 2015; Marion Suiseeya et al., 2021). This demonstrates what can be

achieved when researchers collaborate to follow different actors and cover multiple sites and processes.

Like all research practices, CEE has its limitations. Taking a team of researchers to a global meeting and conducting the training necessary to ensure a shared method of data collection and analysis requires time, a high level of resources, and its own share of negotiation between collaborators (Foyer et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2020). The majority of scholars, particularly those from the Global South and/or graduate students, do not have access to the resources for building themselves into a CEE team and thus, at present, this is a method most readily adopted by well-resourced institutions and academics in the Global North. This brings with it the potential for this research practice – through the relations it builds and the knowledge it produces – to reproduce the power dynamics it sets out to illuminate. However, collaboration and ethnography need not take common forms – as researchers, we can borrow and build on the insights and ethos of CEE and apply it to enable more flexible working practices, which better fit a wider situation of scholars.

In fact, the focus on methodology that has emerged in the study of global environmental governance in recent years (Hochstetler and Laituri 2014; O'Neill et al., 2013; O'Neill and Haas 2019), supports moving beyond reliance on a single method or theoretical approach. While this has promoted 'being there' and participant observation as critical in the study of negotiations, the environmental impact of the academic's presence, the shift to virtual meetings initiated by COVID-19 and a broadened conceptualisation of 'agreement-making' identifies the importance of further advancing and adapting research practices in future scholarship.

4. Adapting to new forms of 'being there'

An additional methodological implication of the concept of agreement-making is the need for increased adaptability and flexibility towards how and where we undertake our research into these processes. Since sites and processes of agreement-making have proliferated and become more complex, our research needs to adapt in response. Flexibility has always been an important component of research into dynamic negotiating environments, where access can be unexpectedly denied or when the assumptions we arrive with do not match the proceedings.

The importance of this adaptability has come more sharply into focus in the context of COVID-19 and the unprecedented developments of the years 2020–21. Measures to slow down the spread of COVID-19 put considerable burden on governments, communities, and individuals worldwide and affected global environmental negotiating processes in a myriad of ways. Conferences were postponed, including the 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Climate Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity's COP 15, and the negotiations towards a new marine biodiversity agreement for the high seas. Many treaty secretariats responded to the loss of face-to-face interaction by establishing virtual sites for inter sessional work to encourage informal dialogue among state and non-state actors, although several were completely closed to non-Parties. This has further impacted the inclusiveness of proceedings for some states, and raises questions of whether virtual multilateralism is accessible and transparent enough for the broadened range of agreement-making actors to participate (Wagner and Allan 2020), as well as how we may need to adapt research in response.

Thinking beyond the geographical materiality and socio-ecological boundaries of sites and expanding notions of digital practice, as exemplified by the analysis of the digital practice of Indigenous Peoples by Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti (2019) or the study by Vadrot et al. (2021b) on digital diplomacy in the context of marine biodiversity negotiations, may be one path to follow. More generally, we need to anticipate both the temporary and long-term changes COVID-19 may introduce to the practices, dynamics, and performances of environmental agreement-making in a multilateral context. In particular,

scholars need to be cognizant of and investigate how new modalities may impact participation, inclusiveness, and the possibilities for protest and dissent that have been key achievements of these sites. This is critical to ensure that marginalised actors that have fought for decades to get a voice continue to be represented and heard (Lightfoot 2016).

These dramatic changes to agreement-making processes, however, also offer an opportunity. In respect to the environmental impact of attending international events, we can use the increase in virtual resources to question whether, when things resume, we still need to be there. Can we adapt our methodologies and/or work collaboratively to study these sites from a distance while maintaining our proximity and association with the actors, organisations, and processes that our research into global environmental agreement-making aims to serve? This is not a question that we need to necessarily answer immediately, or always respond to in the same way, but by becoming more flexible and adaptable to who, how, and where we research global environmental agreement-making we may be able to do more to reduce the environmental footprint of our research.

5. A renewed critical and ethical sensibility

Methodology is only part of the equation in the study of agreement-making. As highlighted throughout, we also want to contribute to the reconceptualisation of global environmental negotiations by making social order – and negotiations as sites of world order-making – central to scholarship. This brings the ethics of studying global environmental negotiations into view, highlighting the stakes of this research and the embeddedness of knowledge production in agreement-making processes.

The stakes in all global environmental politics scholarship are high. The environment is degrading at an unprecedented rate (UN Environment 2019). The IPCC 1.5 °C report highlights the impacts and risks of warming beyond 1.5 °C and emphasises that the window to achieve this temperature goal is rapidly closing (IPCC 2018). In 2019, the extent of biodiversity loss was highlighted when it was reported that ‘of an estimated 8 million animal and plant species (75% of which are insects), around 1 million are threatened with extinction’ (IPBES 2019, 13). And the great Pacific garbage patch is fed by approximately 1.15–2.41 million tonnes of plastic entering the ocean annually (Lebreton 2017).

While global environmental assessments agree that human activities are responsible for this planetary degradation, not all societies are equally polluting, and the impacts and benefits of the global economic system are not evenly distributed. Furthermore, the global community’s response to environmental problems can exacerbate and deepen existing social injustices (Tauli-Corpuz et al., 2020).

Scholars from the Global North are embedded within and directly benefit from an exploitative economic order: it is the wealth of an economy that enables researchers to travel, conduct fieldwork, and publish in international journals. The effects of this on systems of thought and on research practice are profound: the risk being that the researcher potentially holds the same blind spots as the economic system that sustains their research, and, as studies indicate, reproduces the Global North’s dominance in collaborative relations and knowledge outputs (Bansard forthcoming; Connell et al., 2018; Corbera et al., 2016; Eun 2019; Hughes and Paterson 2017; Sharma 2021). The term agreement-making aims to expand the sites and processes studied as constitutive of the collective response to global environmental problems, and this includes the actors and practices of knowledge production that underpin it. We propose that one way we may counter academic and cultural dominance is by becoming more sensitive towards our location in these processes and by exploring the *practical utility* that critical research may serve.

The approaches that we develop for the study of global environmental agreement-making can be built on an understanding and sensitivity towards scholarly embeddedness within the world order and potential role in order-making. Through introducing the term

agreement-making, we would like to facilitate the cultivation of a collective scholarly attitude, which – through greater awareness of our situatedness (Haraway 1988) – aims to illuminate the stakes of global environmental negotiations and better serve the actors and organisations that challenge power asymmetries and steward the Earth. The in-depth knowledge and insight that we generate through thick description can serve important practical purposes for the actors, organisations, and processes that we study. With greater emphasis on the practical utility of our research, we could further cultivate this dimension of agreement-making as a research practice. In creating the necessary connections to conduct interviews and observe environmental negotiations, we also create opportunities to more actively align our research questions with the actors and organisations that we study, and in doing so potentially challenge the power asymmetries we uncover.

This can be achieved through cultivating varied levels of distance and proximity. Depending on the research problem, distance can make it easier to maintain a critical view of social order and its reproduction (Coleman and Hughes 2014). This can lead to practical suggestions for institutional innovations designed to challenge social hierarchies, as Hughes and Paterson (2017) attempt in their research of author relations in Working Group III of the IPCC. At the same time, proximity can be fundamental in building trust, facilitating access to close-knit networks, and developing understanding of actors who may otherwise be hard to reach (Thew et al., 2020). Working closely with marginalised actors, such as Indigenous Peoples, can provide a different perspective on negotiating processes and initiate new questions, which may make it possible to reveal the hierarchies and power relations that generate their marginalization (Inoue 2018; Smith 2021; Vecchione Gonçalves 2009, 2018). This may identify new political sites, strategies and targeted agenda items left unconsidered in previous scholarship, but which are prioritized by certain groups to contest marginalization and create new political spaces in the struggle to protect lifeworlds and the Earth that gave rise to them.

6. Conclusion

Researching environmental negotiations is sometimes frustrating given that they appear out of pace with what is necessary to stop and reverse global environmental degradation. The sense of urgency has only heightened with the global health pandemic, which at the same time as highlighting the costs of human-driven planetary change, has slowed the negotiations to prevent it. However, COVID-19 has also provided space for us to reflect on the advances in negotiation scholarship over the past two decades, and given an opportunity to ask questions about our situation, and our research practices that could further propel this scholarship.

In this perspective piece, we have set out to highlight some of the methodological advances that have been instrumental in challenging how we identify significant actors and sites of negotiation. Building on these, we introduced the term *agreement-making* to further challenge how we conceive of negotiations and to focus attention on the order-making intrinsic to all attempts to govern the environment and govern *through* the environment. Through this concept, we aim to enable new connections between methodologically diverse forms of scholarship into the wide variety of actors, sites and processes constitutive of agreement formation. And critically, catalyse a new research agenda on the relationship to, perpetuation of and potential for re-making global orders of social, political, economic and environmental relations through agreement-making.

We suggest that to think and study in these terms is to think of ourselves – as scholars and knowledge producers – as embedded in these processes. Thus, while it is clear that the complexity of global environmental agreement-making and shifts in negotiating practices will continue to require further methodological innovation, we also suggest that this alone is not enough. We propose that alongside this focus on methods, we need to cultivate greater sensitivity towards the ethics of

our research, that is, reflecting on our situation as researchers within these processes and the potential of our research to practically support the communities that we study so that collectively we may become better environmental stewards.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant 804599) led by Alice Vadrot. The collective piece draws on discussion among the authors during three events: firstly, the workshop "Conducting Research at Global Environmental Negotiations" organized by Hannah Hughes and Alice Vadrot with the financial support of the ERC project MARIPOLDATA, (<https://www.maripoldata.eu>), which took place in Vienna on September 10–11, 2019. Secondly, the Innovative Panel II of the 2020 Earth System Governance Conference entitled "How do practitioners view our work? A transdisciplinary debate about the relevance of (studying) intergovernmental negotiation sites" organized by Alice Vadrot. Thirdly, a virtual workshop on "Conducting Research on Global Environmental-Agreement Making" from 3–5th August, 2021. The authors give special thanks to Emmanuelle Brogat for her support during the event's organization process.

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