A Global Pact for the Environment: Conceptual foundations

Yann Aguila | Jorge E. Viñuales

INTRODUCTION

The adoption, on 10 May 2018, of United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution A/72/L.51, entitled ‘Towards a Global Pact for the Environment’ (Enabling Resolution),1 has justifiably attracted great public attention, including expressions of support and, inevitably, also criticism. The resolution called for the establishment of an Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group, which met in early September 2018 in New York and is scheduled to meet three more times in Nairobi in the first half of 20192 to discuss the substantive aspects of the initiative for a Global Pact for the Environment (GPE). Much could be said about this initiative, in which the authors of this article are closely involved, and which has received ample coverage in the media3 as well as in academic and policy circles.4 In the specific context of this article,5 however, we will limit ourselves to two basic observations, which will provide the necessary background for the analysis of the intellectual origins and conceptual foundations underlying the GPE.

The first observation is that it would be a mistake to see the Enabling Resolution or even the initiative for a GPE as a mere

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1UNGA ‘Towards a Global Pact for the Environment’ UN Doc A/RES/72/277 (10 May 2018) (‘Enabling Resolution’).
5This article is part of a wider research project that brings together the knowledge and expertise of several generations of international environmental lawyers from around the world to contribute to the development of a Global Pact for the Environment (see Y Aguila and JE Viñuales (eds), A Global Pact for the Environment: Legal Foundations (Cambridge C.EENRG, Advance version, 14 January 2019). The authors wish to acknowledge the participation in this research project, the results of which will be published in the form of an edited volume, of the following contributors (in alphabetical order): Virginie Barral, Antonio Benjamin, Laurence Boisson de Chazournes, David Boyd, Edith Brown Weiss, Neil Craik, Pierre-Marie Dupuy, Leslie-Anne Ducic-Paoli, Jorais Ehresson, Francesco Francioni, Gui- laume Futhazar, Shotaro Hamamoto, Marie Jacobsson, Walter Kälin, Yann Kerbrat, Genevra Le Moli, Sandrine Maljean-Dubois, Makane Mbengue, Jane McAdam, Pilar Moraga, Nilüfer Oral, Michel Prieur, Alexander Proetsch, Qin Tianbao, Lavanya Rajamani, Nicholas Robinson, Monserrat Rovalo Otero, Jason Rudall, Christiana Voigt and Zhang Meng.
current development. Quite to the contrary, these developments are the reflection of deeper trends that have been operating in the background for decades. For this reason, our second observation is that a broad question such as whether the adoption of a GPE is desirable, with certain contents that will be discussed later, is best answered not by zooming in to argue about the details – which are, indeed, a matter for debate – but by zooming out to understand the fundamentals.

This is why this article first situates the search for a global framework instrument on environmental protection in a long-term perspective and then discusses the main reasons why it is needed. Against this background, we then present the current expression of this much broader trend, in the form of the initiative for a GPE and the momentum it has generated in policy circles, first and foremost at the level of the UN General Assembly. But the need for such an instrument heavily depends on its nature, content and articulation with existing international instruments, which must be designed to specifically allow for significant flexibility in its implementation by States with different legal systems and political realities. For that reason, we propose an analytical framework to guide the delicate exercise of striking a balance between a range of different considerations.

The latter point has been misinterpreted in some circles, sometimes disingenuously so. The heart of the initiative for a GPE is not the specific formulation of certain principles in the draft project or even the architecture retained for it. Much more importantly, it is the widely shared impression that this is an idea whose time has come.

2 | THE GLOBAL PACT IN THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

The ambition to develop a global pact for the environment is not new. In situating the current initiative, it is important to clarify what forms this ambition has taken in the past and how they fitted within the broader context of global environmental governance.

The first significant attempt to develop a global framework for environmental protection is certainly the Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in June 1972. This is widely considered as the constitutional moment of international environmental law, as well as a catalyst for domestic environmental law. The ‘framework’ provided fell short of a global treaty, but it defined the province of global environmental governance and set the institutional and strategic foundations for further action on environmental protection. The international context was, however, not entirely auspicious for such an important development. Indeed, the deep ideological and policy divides of the Cold War and, no less important, of the quest for ‘permanent’ economic sovereignty by newly independent States and other developing countries undermined, to some extent, the representative character of the statements made at Stockholm. Yet, the Stockholm Conference provided a solid basis on which to build a more structured framework.

During the 1980s, the efforts leading to the adoption of the World Charter for Nature and, following the realization – in the 1982 meeting of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Council – of the scope of environmental degradation, the establishment of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), generated momentum for a second and more structured attempt. Two key recommendations of the WCED’s outcome report, ‘Our Common Future’, were the adoption of a Universal Declaration as well as of a

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10In early May 1972, the Nixon administration announced the mining of the Haiphong harbour, in a major escalation of the Vietnam War. Moreover, countries of the then Soviet bloc abstained from participating in the Stockholm Conference in protest of the exclusion of East Germany. See EP Morgan, ‘Stockholm: The Clean (But Impossible) Dream’ (1972) 8 Foreign Policy 149.

11A major milestone of this quest was the adoption by the UN General Assembly of Resolution 1803(XVI): UNGA ‘Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources’ UN Doc ARES/1803 XVII (14 December 1962). On the legal process leading to this resolution, see NJ Schrijver. ‘Sovereignty over Natural Resources: Balancing Rights and Duties’ (Cambridge University Press 1997). For the wider historical context explaining the need to assert ‘permanent’ sovereignty, see B Simpson, ‘Self-determination and Decolonization’ in M Thomas and A Thomson (eds), The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire (Oxford University Press 2017) 417.

12The tension between development and environmental protection as potentially conflicting goals found expression, among others, in the meeting held at Fouchex, on the outskirts of Geneva, one year before the Stockholm Conference. (Development and Environment: Report and Working Papers of Experts Convened by the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Fouchex, Switzerland 4–12 June 1972) and, subsequently, in December 1971, with the adoption of a resolution by the UN General Assembly asserting the over-riding importance of development (UNGA ‘Development and Environment’ UN Doc ARES/2849/XXI (20 December 1971)). On this tension, see K Mickelson, ‘The Stockholm Conference and the Creation of the South-North Divide in International Environmental Law and Policy’ in S Alatan et al (eds), International Environmental Law and the Global South (Cambridge University Press 2016) 109.

Convention on Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development. One of the leading international organizations active in the area of environmental protection, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), developed on that basis a Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development, which it sought to introduce – through the delegation of Iceland – in the process leading to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. But the attempts to have such an instrument adopted were unsuccessful. Yet, IUCN, through its Environmental Law Programme, has made efforts to keep this idea alive, revising and updating the ‘Draft Covenant’ since the 1990s.

By contrast, the idea to adopt by consensus, and this time by the full international community, a universal declaration came to fruition in the form of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. At the time, some saw the Rio Declaration as a step backwards because of the prominent place it gives to development concerns. However, with the benefit of hindsight, the Rio Declaration can be considered as the closest step taken so far to formulate a newly minted or stated for the first time in an authoritative instrument on environmental law. The IUCN, in collaboration with the International Council of Environmental Law, have pursued work on a ‘Draft Covenant’, which now has several editions. IUCN, Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development (5th edn, IUCN 2017) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=400&nr=2443>.


3 | THE NEED FOR A GLOBAL PACT

The adoption of a GPE would constitute an important milestone in the evolution of international environmental law and, more generally, of global environmental governance. There are several reasons for it, some of which are readily apparent and some others which require a more detailed understanding of international, comparative and domestic law. The first reason is relatively straightforward. The Rio Declaration is not binding as such, a feature that has prevented some principles from deploying their full effects.

The second reason is the absence of a broader common core of legally binding principles on which significant gaps in the regulation could rely upon, which leaves certain important questions too open or unsettled. Most observers would accept that plastic pollution is currently a matter that has largely remained unaddressed or has ‘fallen between the cracks’ of international instruments. In fact, the entire land-based marine pollution regime rests, at the global level, on some lacunae provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) or on soft law instruments, and the same is true of environmental matters (stated in Principle 10).

Other principles, particularly the three norms that constitute the heart of customary international environmental law, namely prevention (stated in Principle 2), the requirement to conduct an environmental impact assessment (stated in Principle 17) and the duty of cooperation (stated in Principles 18 and 19), also received their authoritative formulation in the Rio Declaration. But these examples also illustrate the limitations of a statement of principles in a ‘soft law’ instrument such as the Rio Declaration. Such limitations highlight the need for a Global Pact.
the critical problem of air pollution, which is only regulated regionally at the present.30 These are certainly not minor lacunae that can be addressed by mere ‘tweaks’ of existing instruments. In time, they will call for an organized binding response. In the meantime, their broad regulation could rely on a general statement of binding principles.

Third, there are even broader questions that influence the operation of the entire international environmental law system and that have been largely overlooked. A major example is consumption-driven environmental degradation, that is, environmental degradation in one country led by consumption in others.31 Unfortunately, neither the Rio Declaration32 nor the numerous multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) have much to offer in this regard. The large majority of them (with the notable exception of CITES33) focus on production and, thus, they offer almost no means to address the situation of a country in which environmental degradation is driven by foreign consumption.

Fourth, yet another form of gap concerns the possible conflicts between instruments with limited sectoral or spatial scope. The ocean may appear, from the perspective of the climate change regime or that of the ocean dumping regime as a carbon sink or a carbon sequestration dumpsite,34 but that is in open conflict with the requirements of the provisions on the protection and preservation of the marine environment under the UNCLOS35 or in the ongoing negotiations relating to the protection of biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction.36 Legally, there are no overarching principles, aside from the limited set of customary international environmental law norms, that could provide solutions to such far-reaching conflicts. Thus, when one considers the questions of ‘gaps’ seriously, beyond the superficial references to commonly acknowledged lacunae, there is a much deeper need for a binding overarching framework.

A fifth problem, related to the previous one, comes from the fact that some of the Rio principles have been understood and treated differently across treaty contexts and their related dispute settlement mechanisms, with important practical implications. Three examples concern the different positions taken with respect to the nature and scope of the precautionary principle/approach,37 those regarding the spatial scope of the requirement to conduct an environmental impact assessment38 and those relating to public participation.39 This divergence is possible because of a lack of an overarching statement of binding principles.

A sixth and important reason is that the guidance provided by the Rio Declaration to national legislators and courts is neither clear nor strong enough.40 The example of the precautionary principle/approach provides, once again, an apposite illustration. One can attempt, in this regard, to identify uses of this principle and to organize them across a spectrum that goes from more conservative to more ambitious ones.41 Such references have indeed been used: (i) to caution against the principle’s ‘potentially paralyzing effects’;42 (ii) to assess whether certain measures expressly adopted on the basis of the precautionary principle are indeed justified under this principle;43 (iii) as a stand-alone norm


relevant to produce procedural effects (the reversal of the burden of proof),
(iv) as a stand-alone norm relevant to the interpretation of an
environmental provision governing a case; (v) as a stand-alone norm
for reviewing of government action; (vi) as a stand-alone norm creat-
ing a positive procedural obligation; (vii) as a stand-alone norm redef-
ing the parameters of liability (effectively transforming a fault-
based liability system into a strict liability one); and (viii) as a stand-
alone norm requiring the creation of a new administrative system.

One possible reason for this variation is that the understanding of this
principle fluctuates significantly across jurisdictions. Legislators and
judges who are aware of the scope of the environmental crisis would
be certainly more empowered in their everyday work if they could rely
on a binding treaty rather than on a soft law instrument. Environmental
protection may face great resistance in some specific periods of the
political life of a country, but international norms are patient. Lack of
reliance on them or even open confrontation do not necessarily jeop-
ardize their operation.

Finally, a binding instrument with an institutional structure, even
a very light one, would be more conducive to the constant interpret-
ation of its principles, either in concreto, for instance in the context
of specific communications, or in abstrato, for example by means of
authoritative interpretations such as the practice of general
comments in human rights committees.

Overall then, although the Rio Declaration has made a lasting
contribution to global environmental governance, its very nature pre-
vents it from addressing the type of problems faced by the current
global environmental governance structure.

4 | THE INITIATIVE FOR A GLOBAL PACT AND THE UN PROCESS

The previous section briefly presented the broader context of the ini-
tiative for a GPE. The initiative emerged in the run-up to the Paris
Agreement. The period going from the Rio Summit on Sustainable
Development, held in June 2012, to the adoption of the Paris Agree-
ment in December 2015 saw several major developments, most
notably the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Develop-
ment in July and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,
with its Sustainable Development Goals, in September 2015.

In this more specific context, in November 2015, the Commission
Environnement of the Club des juristes, a legal think tank based in Paris,
released a report on how to strengthen the effectiveness of interna-
tional environmental law. The report made 21 recommendations,
including the adoption of an International Environmental Pact. Fol-
lowing the adoption of the Paris Agreement, Laurent Fabius (President
of the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Conven-
tion on Climate Change) decided to support the idea and to take it to
the international level. Throughout 2016, a documentary basis was
assembled by the Commission Environnement and, in early 2017, an
international network of environmental law experts was set up.

Today, this network has over 100 experts from more than 40 differ-
ent countries representing all legal systems and a wide variety of
country situations. Under the aegis of the Commission Environnement,
and with support from a smaller group of experts who handled the
drafting, this network made a range of submissions over five rounds
of structured consultations which unfolded in the first half of 2017.

Such consultations addressed matters such as the need (or not) for an
international treaty, its overall structure, its content and, more specif-
ically, the formulation of the principles that would feature in the draft
agreement. The drafting process also benefited from some previous
efforts, including IUCN’s Draft Covenant and another draft project.

44Australia (New South Wales): Telstra Corporation Ltd v Hornsby Shire Council [2006]
NSWLEC 133; [2006] 67 NSWLR 256 (relying on the precautionary principle to require the
proponent of a development – the installation of mobile phone antennas – to establish the
absence of risk); Brazil: STJ, Resp n 1300027/SP, 3a turma, decision of 11 June 2012 (civil
liability case where the burden of proving the impact on aquatic fauna caused by the con-
struction of a dam was reversed, requiring the proponent to establish that its project would
not have the alleged impact); Canada: Resource Corp v Hanke, 2007 SCC 7; Clements v Cle-
ments, 2012 SCC 32 (where causation rules were relaxed somewhat in a case in which the
defendant negligently had created a risk and scientific uncertainty prevented the plaintiff
from proving causation); India: Vellore Citizens’ Welfare Forum v Union of India AIR, [1996]
SC 2715 (where the industry was deemed to bear the burden of proving that its activity
caused no harm); Indonesia: Ministry of Environment v PT. Kalista Alam, Decision of the
Supreme Court No 651 K/PDT/2015 (28 August 2015) (applying precautionary reasoning –
presented as in dubio pro natura – to effect a relaxation of causation requirements).

45Mexico: Case XXVII.309 CS., SF/GJ, 10th Period, Book 37, December 2016, 1840 (relying
on Principle 15 of the Rio Declaration to interpret the right to a healthy environment
as a very light one, would be more conducive to the constant interpret-
ation of its principles, either in concreto, for instance in the context
of specific communications, or in abstrato, for example by means of
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The outcome of the major international conference was UNGA ‘The Future We Want’
UN Doc A/RES/66/208 (11 September 2012).

51UNFCCC Decision 1/CP.21, Adoption of the Paris Agreement’ UN Doc FCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1 (29 January 2016).


53UNGA ‘Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ UN
Doc A/RES/70/1 (21 October 2015).

54Environment Commission of the Club des Juristes, ‘Increasing the Effectiveness of Inter-
national Environmental Law: Duties of States, Rights of Individuals’ (November 2015).

55See Y Aguila, ‘La Adopción de un Pacto Internacional para la Protección del Medio Ambi-

56See n 16.

57See ‘Projet de Pacte International Relatif au Droit des Êtres Humains l’Environnement’ [https://cidce.org/fr].
developed by the Centre International de Droit Comparé de l’Environnement (CIDCE), a nongovernmental organization based in France.

To finalize the draft text, an expert meeting was convened in Paris at the facilities of France’s Conseil Constitutionnel on 23 June 2017. For logistical reasons, only some 30 experts participated in this meeting, which under the chairmanship of Laurent Fabius proceeded to the discussion and adoption of the draft project. The following day, at a high-profile symposium held at the Grand Amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne, the draft project was presented by Mr Fabius to French President Emmanuel Macron, in a ceremony featuring former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, former Governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger, the French Minister of the Environment Nicolas Hulot, the Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, several other political figures, and a wider public of experts, diplomats, students and interested people.58

Between June 2017 and early November 2018, when the present article was written, several major steps have been taken to support the idea of a GPE, including many expert gatherings,59 a high-level event on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting on 19 September 2017 titled ‘Summit on a Global Pact for the Environment’,60 a Sino-French Summit between French President Emmanuel Macron and Chinese President Xi Jinping on 8–10 January 2018,61 and the meeting of the UN General Assembly in which the Enabling Resolution was adopted.

This meeting was held in early May 2018, under point 14 of the Agenda of the UN General Assembly’s plenary.62 The French delegation introduced the Draft Resolution (A/72/L.51) to which the Kenyan delegation proposed minor amendments (A/72/L.53), essentially aimed at ensuring that the process unfolds in Nairobi. Some other delegations (the United States, the Russian Federation, the Philippines and Syria) took the floor to oppose the project or aspects of it. The arguments aired by these delegations included matters of process (e.g. the fact that the project had not been sufficiently discussed or that France had not engaged with the chairperson of the Group of 77 plus China), the need for respect of the sovereignty of States to exploit their natural resources, the need to focus on the implementation of existing instruments rather than on using political capital for an additional normative development, and matters of formulation relating to the need to leave the outcome of the ad hoc group open-ended. Interestingly, a recorded vote was requested (instead of the frequent practice of adoption without a vote), which yielded a 143 majority, with only six votes against (the Philippines, Russian Federation, Syria, Turkey, United States and Iran, although the latter noted at the end that its vote had been inaccurately recorded, because it supported adoption) and six abstentions (Belarus, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Tajikistan). This distribution of votes, and the identity of the current governments – not the countries – voting against the resolution, speaks for itself. It is, however, important to recall it in an article that hopefully will serve as a record for future generations to know where the resistance came from.

The arguments, although not entirely unfounded, ring hollow. The GPE has been in the making for decades and asking for more time is possibly a euphemism for supporting inaction. The same applies to arguments relating to improving implementation by means of piecemeal – at best – corrections in existing agreements. Adequate consultation of the chairperson of the Group of 77 plus China would have certainly been useful, but developing countries voted massively in favour of the resolution and the Chinese delegation explicitly took the floor to support the French initiative. As for references to sovereignty, there is no element in the proposal or in the idea of a GPE that explicitly or implicitly enforces sovereignty upon sovereignty as understood in contemporary international law. Perhaps the reaction was a resurgence from the past, as suggested by the Syrian delegate who noted, quite surprisingly in the light of the existence of hundreds of global environmental treaties, that ‘the concept of world environmental law was still legally controversial’.63 In any case, these and other concerns will have ample room for discussion in the process envisioned in the Enabling Resolution.

In a nutshell, the resolution calls for the UN Secretary-General to prepare a ‘technical and evidence-based report that identifies and assesses possible gaps in international environmental law and environment-related instruments with a view to strengthening their implementation’.64 This report, an advance version of which was published in late November 2018,65 will be discussed by an ‘ad hoc open-ended working group’ with a view to ‘consider possible options to address possible gaps in international environmental law and environment-related instruments, as appropriate, and, if deemed necessary, the scope, parameters and feasibility of an international instrument’.66 The working group is tasked with ‘making recommendations [to the General Assembly], which may include the convening of an intergovernmental conference to adopt an international instrument’.67 Ambiguity is pervasive in this and other formulations used in the Enabling Resolution. What seems far more precise is the demanding time frame for the ad hoc group to do so, namely during the first half of 2019. The President of the UN General Assembly appointed two co-chairs for the working group, one from Portugal (Ambassador Francisco António Duarte Lopes) and the other from Lebanon (Ambassador Amal

59See n 4.
60See Speech delivered by President Emmanuel Macron during the international launch summit of the ‘Global Pact for the Environment’, which took place during the 72nd UN General Assembly, available at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/diplomatie-en-france/diplomatie-internationale/actualites/une-cime-dans-le-sillage-de-la-cime-de-paris-sur-la-durable-
62See ‘General Assembly Decides to Establish Working Group Aimed at Identifying Gaps in International Environmental Law’ (UN Meeting coverage, GA 12015, 10 May 2018).
63Cited in ibid.
64‘Enabling Resolution (n 1) para 1.
65‘Enabling Resolution (n 1) para 2.
66‘General Assembly Adoption of Enabling Resolution’ (UN Doc A/73/419) (30 November 2018).
67Ibid.
Mudallali). The group held its first meeting on 5–7 September 2018 to address organizational matters. Three other meetings focusing on substance will be held in the first half of 2019 (the last session is scheduled to start on 20 May 2019), all in Nairobi, as had been the wish of the Kenyan delegation. This is key to ensure the buy-in from developing countries as well as from UNEP.

It is important to note, as will become apparent in the next section, that the initiative for a GPE never expected for the draft project to be adopted as such, or even in a mildly revised form. The text proposed is above all representative of an approach, which may change significantly, even fundamentally during the negotiations. The key expectation is that negotiations will indeed start and that the ‘instrument’ envisioned by the negotiation mandate will constitute a step further than the Rio Declaration.

5 | NATURE, CONTENT AND INTERACTION WITH EXISTING INSTRUMENTS

5.1 | A binding instrument

The initiative for a GPE specifically aims for the adoption of a binding treaty providing an umbrella to a wider body of MEAs. Although the Enabling Resolution leaves the question open, referring only to ‘possible options’ to address possible gaps … and, if deemed necessary, the scope, parameters and feasibility of an international instrument’, the explicit mention of the ‘convening of an intergovernmental conference to adopt an international instrument’ makes abundantly clear that the recommendations of the ad hoc working group may lead to the adoption of a treaty. At the very least, that ‘possible option’ is certainly within the cards. Some observers have suggested that a soft law instrument could also be a possible option. That position is consistent with the terms of the Enabling Resolution, but at odds with its spirit, as highlighted in the very title of the resolution ‘Towards a Global Pact for the Environment’.

The term ‘Pact’ unequivocally refers to a binding treaty. It was selected, among several other terms falling under the genus treaty (e.g. covenant, convention, agreement, treaty, protocol), both for its similarity in at least three UN languages (Pact, Pacte, Pacto) and in order to convey the generality of the instrument envisioned, which is to be a ‘Pact’ adopted by States but emphasizing the role of a much wider body of stakeholders. In addition, the term Pact connotes a general value stance taken by the international community, much as in the context of the recently drafted Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees.

Since the early stages of the initiative, and throughout the discussions within the network of experts, it was clearly understood that the draft project was only intended as a basis for discussion that would be subject to detailed scrutiny by all States and very likely undergo substantial, even fundamental modifications. At the same time, however, the draft project was intended to substantiate the claim that over a hundred environmental law experts, including academics but also practitioners, from all four corners of the world considered the idea to be realistic and ripe for action. Thus, the draft project is, in many ways, a ‘proof of concept’ developed to lend credibility to the larger enterprise of launching negotiations to conclude a GPE. This clarification is important, because much of the criticism that the initiative has faced, including from overtly hostile quarters, either rely on the aforementioned euphemisms for inaction or focus on details of formulation in the draft project which will very likely change in the course of the negotiations, without undermining the overall idea.

5.2 | Fundamental choices relating to content and design

The contents of the draft project reflect a number of fundamental choices arising from the consultation process. These choices concern: (i) the conciseness of the instrument; (ii) a formulation emphasizing its enduring character; (iii) its adaptability to different country contexts; (iv) a balance between rights and duties; (v) a balance between well-established principles and novel ones; and (vi) a balance between the normative and the institutional dimension.

The draft project is specifically drafted as a very concise document, a few pages long, avoiding as much as possible unnecessary complications. This is consistent not only with the end result sought by the initiative for a GPE, that is, a binding statement of fundamental principles, but also with the nature of the draft project as such, which is to provide an accessible basis for discussion that can be scrutinized in great detail by States and other stakeholders, without requiring inordinate amounts of time and effort.

The style used in the formulation of the project seeks to avoid any excessive embeddedness in our present time or, more specifically, it attempts to formulate principles of enduring relevance for the present but also the future. This is a common feature of instruments that are expected to deploy their effects through long periods of time, such as constitutions, human rights treaties, constitutive instruments of international organizations, and so on. However, unlike many of these other treaties, the endurance of the draft project does not rest on a heavy institutional architecture but on the general formulation of its principles. This is because the scientific understanding of environmental problems, as well as of the suitability of different answers, is constantly changing.

The generality of the formulation is also important for the adaptability of the draft project to the very different circumstances prevailing across countries. It would be unfair to say that the draft project assumes that ‘one size fits all’. This important consideration was specifically taken into account by the expert
network and the drafting committee, which did their best to ensure that the text is sufficiently general to be capable of providing normative guidance while at the same time allowing States to tailor the implementation of the principles in the GPE to their own circumstances.

Reflecting the wide recognition, at the domestic level,70 and the increasingly pressing calls, at the international level,71 for a right to an environment of a certain quality (often characterized with the adjective ‘healthy’, ‘clean’, ‘safe’ or ‘generally satisfactory’), the draft project formulates, in its Article 1, a ‘right to an ecologically sound environment’.72 This statement is mirrored, in Article 2, by the assertion of a correlative ‘duty to take care of the environment’. Importantly, this duty is incumbent on ‘[e]very State or international institution, every person, natural or legal, public or private’.73 This is a very progressive stance, which has been criticized for excessively expanding the spectrum of duty-bearers and, thereby, possibly undermining the role of the State as the primary duty-bearer in connection with both human rights and environmental norms. This is a relevant point, which States will need to examine in great detail in their discussions concerning a future GPE. The current formulation of Article 2 is designed to put on the table the full spectrum of possible duty-bearers or, in other words, to highlight that the duty to take care of the environment is not to be conceived of only as a duty of States. The architecture of the draft project flows from this combination of a right and a duty. In Articles 3–20, the draft project states a series of rights (e.g. Articles 9–11, which unravel Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, but explicitly stating that these are rights of ‘every person’) and duties (on a range of duty-bearers, including ‘States’ or the ‘Parties’, but also ‘their subnational entities’,74 ‘present generations’75 or, by avoiding the identification of a specific duty-bearer, any entity which is in a situation covered by the duty76).

The principles featured in the draft project include well-known norms,77 in some cases using formulations that clarify previous ambiguities or expand the principles’ scope.78 But the project also innovates by including principles, which so far had not featured in a general statement of principles79 or even in previous treaties.80 The expert group sought to strike a balance between the consolidation and the innovation function of the project. Consolidation is important to strengthen existing norms as well as to assuage potential concerns of States reluctant to undertaking new commitments. Yet, some measure of innovation is also important because the project must be an additional step in the evolution of global environmental governance and, as much as possible, an inspiring and energizing one.

Finally, the draft project strikes a balance between its normative dimension (the formulation of principles) and its institutional one (the creation of a new body). Sensitive to the concerns expressed by several members of the expert group, which more broadly reflect States’ concerns, the draft project provides for a very light institutional component. Indeed, Article 21 contemplates the creation of a Committee of independent experts, whose structure and mandate would be midway between that of the committees set up by human rights instruments and that of the compliance committees established by MEAs. The non-adversarial approach followed by Article 21 of the draft project is derived from the latter source, specifically from Article 15 of the Paris Agreement, which reflects similar provisions in earlier MEAs. However, because the draft project does not provide for the creation of a Conference of the Parties or of any other strong institutional architecture, this committee would operate in a manner akin to that of the Human Rights Committee established by the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The articulation of these two components, namely a statement of principles and a Committee of independent experts with general and specific compliance as well as interpretative functions, seeks to achieve a focus on implementation without relying on a heavy institutional structure.

Figure 1 summarizes these six dimensions in graphic form. This figure is offered as a tool for the discussion and design of a potential GPE which may arise from the work of the ad hoc working group. A

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71See ‘UN Expert Calls for Global Recognition of the Right to Safe and Healthy Environment’ (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 5 March 2018) (in which former Special Rapporteur John Knox states: ‘I hope the Human Rights Council agrees the right to a healthy environment is an idea whose time is here. The Council should consider supporting the recognition of this right in a global instrument’); ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment’ UN Doc A/73/188 (19 July 2018) para 37 (‘The time has come for the United Nations to formally recognize the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, or, more simply, the human right to a healthy environment’); ‘Statement by David R. Boyd, Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment at the 73rd Session of the General Assembly’ (25 October 2018) (after six years as mandate holder, Professor Knox came to the conclusion that there is a glaring gap in the global human rights system. He and I are in 100% agreement that it is time for the UN to recognize the fundamental human right to live in a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.’).
74Draft Global Pact for the Environment (n 72) art 17.
75Ibid art 4.
76Ibid art 6 (Precaution) or art 20 (‘Diversity of national circumstances’).
balance in all six dimensions, and perhaps in some others, will need to be struck by the working group and, as the case may be, by the intergovernmental conference. Commentators, whether from academic or policy circles, would also need to shed light on these dimensions and, more specifically, on the advantages and disadvantages of different combinations. The conceptual chart offered in Figure 1 will hopefully be of use to provide some structure to the debates.

5.3 Interaction with existing instruments

The Enabling Resolution, in its paragraph 9, ‘recognises that the process indicated above [i.e. the ad hoc open-ended working group and its possible continuation by an intergovernmental conference] should not undermine existing relevant legal instruments and frameworks and relevant global, regional and sectoral bodies’.

It is important, in clarifying the scope of this paragraph, to dispel one common misunderstanding. A GPE would neither exclude the application of other instruments to the same situation nor be prevented from applying when such other instruments apply. It is possible for existing instruments to be either more specific or more general than the proposed GPE, or even both more specific and more general at the same time (the analysis may have to be conducted provision by provision or clause by clause). It is also possible that the proposed GPE may cover areas left open by existing instruments (e.g. providing a global fallback regime for matters as diverse as plastic pollution or, more generally, land-based pollution or atmospheric pollution, before a more targeted instrument is adopted) or that it may contribute to their interpretation in such a way that unlocks the potential of certain provisions (e.g. to clarify the implications of some existing treaties for consumption-driven pollution). These and other forms of interaction are possible and acceptable.

Out of all the possible forms of interaction between existing instruments and the proposed one, only those whereby the latter would ‘undermine’ the former are to be avoided. The term ‘undermine’ must be understood, in this context, as capable of defeating the environmental protection purpose of existing treaties. As long as the proposed GPE does not defeat the environmental protection purposes pursued by these many instruments, the approach would be deemed consistent with the parameters set in paragraph 9. It is difficult to conceive how the proposed GPE could defeat those purposes. Those who argue against the proposed GPE or a specific provision included in it would have the burden to identify how exactly and to what extent there is a genuine risk that the Pact may undermine an existing instrument. Such arguments should be established in a manner that is no less ‘technical and evidence-based’ than the report envisaged in the Enabling Resolution, which was published in late November 2018.

It should be noted that, from a technical standpoint, the International Court of Justice has expressly recognized that different norms may all apply together to cover different aspects of a complex situation. Thus, the Court has referred to the need to take into account the prevention of environmental harm in assessing the necessity and proportionality of an armed action taken in self-defence or, more specifically, to the possibility that human rights norms and norms of international humanitarian law (by analogy, also environmental norms) may apply together. For present purposes, the relevance of

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82 Ibid para 25; Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Advisory Opinion) [2004] ICJ Rep 136 para 106.
this point is to recall that different norms are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The principles formulated in a general statement such as the proposed GPE could: (i) apply together with other more specific norms and treaties; (ii) without either excluding their application or being excluded by it; and (iii) making a useful contribution to the regime governing a range of different situations, either by addressing aspects left open by existing treaties or by contributing to the interpretation of the latter.

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It is for States to decide whether the adoption of a GPE, of a nature, scope and content to be discussed, is indeed an idea whose time has come. It is of course very likely that, 50 years from now, arguments against the GPE will look like arguments against the 1966 International Human Rights Covenants, or even the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights or the 1948 Genocide Convention, that is, as either politically motivated or, at best, as retrograde.

The proposed GPE is not an unrealistic idea. It is, in our view, a logical next step in the evolution of global environmental governance. The adoption of an overarching statement of principles is consistent with the practice in many other areas of international law. One could refer in this regard not only to human rights but also to the law of the sea, international trade law, international criminal law or international humanitarian law. The situation is similar at the domestic level. Countries from all corners of the world have adopted general environmental statutes which, despite their diverging scope, have a transversal application to environmental protection and seek to provide some unity and coherence of principle to sectoral statutes. In many cases, these general statutes came after sectoral ones precisely to provide some measure of consolidation and coherence. We do not see why similar considerations would not be relevant for international environmental law.

There is, however, much room for arguing about the nature, scope and content of an overarching instrument and, in offering a framework (Figure 1) to structure the diversity of arguments as well as in fleshing out how a balance between different considerations was struck in the draft project, this article hopes to contribute to such discussions and provide a written record for future generations of how this generation sought to address the problems – largely of its own making – that they will face much more acutely.

ORCID

Jorge E. Viñuales

Yann Aguil is Professor of Public Law, Sciences Po; President of the Environment Commission of the Club des Juristes; and Secretary General of the Group of Experts for the Pact.

Jorge E. Viñuales is Harold Samuel Professor of Law and Environmental Policy at the University of Cambridge; Founder of the Cambridge Centre for Environment, Energy and Natural Resource Governance (C–EENRG); and Member of the Group of Experts for the Pact.

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82See UNCLOS (n 29).
85See UNCLOS (n 29).