Photo by Neil O'Halloran.

A hawksbill turtle that may outlive many governments.

ENVIRONMENT

Surviving the Political Storms

by Paul Steinberg

How can we govern the Earth's resources sustainably when the institutions of governance are themselves subject to chronic turnover? Consider the life of a sea turtle hatchling born on a Caribbean beach in 1960. From the time that it first waddled precariously to the sea, to the day when it finally reached sexual maturity a half century later, it had to navigate a succession of political and economic storms. During that period, the world saw more than 200 successful military coups. From 1946 to 2003, 229 armed conflicts took place in 148 nations. From 1970 to 2006, 39 countries experienced triple-digit annual inflation for more than one year.

Changes such as these can affect whether sensitive beach habitat has protected status, whether tourist-based conservation strategies are able to thrive and whether fishermen respect the law. The environmental movements that have arisen throughout the world in recent decades often point to the need for change in our thinking, in our daily practices and in our political institutions. Yet in societies subject to chronic political and economic upheaval, the associated churning of institutions threatens to undercut efforts at sustainable development.

Rethinking Policy Change

What does it take to bring about needed changes in government policies? Research on this question has focused almost exclusively on the United States and other stable industrialized countries. Against a backdrop of stable institutions, researchers have found that major reforms are typically associated with changes in social conditions, such as growth in the influence of NGOs, the energy crisis of the 1970s or the election of Ronald Reagan with his anti-regulatory agenda. They point to key moments, such as the installation of a new legislature or committee chair or to swings in national mood, as the windows of opportunity that make policy change possible.

But what does this literature tell us about policy change in Latin America and other regions where political upheaval and economic crisis are the norm? It is certainly true that social change has provided opportunities for reformers in Latin American countries to advance environmental agendas.

- When Amazonian indigenous people mobilized in the early 1990s, catching Bolivia's political establishment by surprise, conservationists and indigenous leaders were quick to forge alliances. They exploited the political opening and made a push for indigenous management of protected areas, leading to the creation of Gran Chaco National Park, the world's largest protected dry tropical forest.

- In Brazil, environmental groups that had maintained a low profile during military rule were animated and united during the democratic transition of the mid-1980s. This political opening provided them an opportunity to push for and to help write an environmental chapter in the new constitution.

- Costa Rican reformers seized the opportunity presented by the Sandinista uprising in neighboring Nicaragua, expropriating land owned by that country's dictator, Anastasio Somoza, and turning it into one of Costa Rica's first national parks. They exploited the crisis and drew on longstanding nationalist sentiment to help consolidate what is today one of the world's great national park systems.

Clearly, large-scale shifts in national conditions provide opportunities for policy innovation and institutional reform. But what happens when there is "too much" change? The very conditions that in moderation promote policy change in stable democracies may, when present in excess, inhibit it by preventing the consolidation of reforms. After all, moments of crisis provide an opening for opponents of environmental regulation as well. Even without actual reversals of policy, major political and economic developments can distract public attention, leading to a decline in funding or lapses in regulatory oversight.

Consider the following examples:

- In the mid-1990s, Ecuador's environment minister Yolanda Kakabadse was doing an exceptional job of reforming policies and practices to promote sustainable development. Her efforts attracted substantial international support and won praise from domestic conservation groups — until her government was ousted in a coup.

- Guatemala's attempts to attract international funding for forest-based climate mitigation projects have foundered because the country's legal and institutional uncertainty has deterred potential partners.

- In the early 1990s, Bolivian environmental reformers created a national environmental trust fund to "dampen the oscillations" associated with political change and budgetary cycles. They created a solid organizational structure that attracted significant funding from foreign governments and the World Bank and served as a model that was subsequently replicated throughout the developing world. Yet after a change of government in the late 1990s, the fund was broken up and scattered among various agencies, ultimately scaring away donors.

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission famously defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." To achieve this goal requires putting in place new institutions and social practices that endure for decades and even centuries. Yet as these examples demonstrate, environmental sustainability requires sustainable institutions.

The need for institutions that last carries significant implications for social science research on policy and governance. When the durability of institutions is no longer the default assumption for theories of change, the question becomes: What mechanisms can be used to create institutional resilience in the face of social instability?

Tethering to Professional Bureaucracies

Policy reformers in unstable political systems are acutely aware of the tenuous nature of their influence, and they frequently pursue strategies with this limitation in mind. They can often be found attaching numerous tethers to their new policy initiatives, like boat owners at the docks before an approaching squall. Often the social storm makes a mockery of these attempts, tossing the institutional structure onto the rocky shoals. In other cases, however, the tethers hold, and new policies achieve a measure of consolidation over time.

There are several tethers at reformers' disposal, each with its own strengths and limitations. The classic approach is to embed a new policy or set of policies in government bureaucracies that provide long-term public goods and have a measure of insulation from the whims of patronage politics.

A number of East Asian countries benefit from highly professional bureaucracies that serve as a buffer against the effects of turnover and crisis. In most developing and

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post-communist countries, however, bureaucracies provide at best a thin thread of continuity across administrations. In these settings, political change at the executive level is associated with turnover in agency personnel reaching well into the ranks of mid-level managers. Latin America is particularly prone to patronage-based appointments, which lead to job insecurity and compromise the effectiveness of the agency.

One way to hedge against the weaknesses of an unstable bureaucracy is to create a quasi-state agency. These organizations have a government-sanctioned public function but enjoy considerable autonomy in hiring and management decisions, making them less susceptible to manipulation by political leaders.

The number of quasi-state agencies in developing countries has grown in recent decades, partly in response to concerns about patronage and corruption. But institutional autonomy comes at a cost. Apart from concerns about public accountability, autonomy can compromise the effectiveness of an agency that has a transformative mission. The mission of an environmental agency typically requires its staff to confront powerful entrenched interests, such as mining companies, ministries of agriculture and planning unaccustomed to prioritizing environmental concerns and forestry agencies rife with patronage and corruption. Confronting these vested interests is an undertaking that requires high-level political support, not autonomy from politicians.

In fact, the designers of Costa Rica's environment ministry debated this issue at length in the 1980s. Younger participants in that debate — including the future president, Oscar Arias — argued for an autonomous agency. However, their more seasoned colleagues prevailed, contending that only a cabinet-level government agency would have the necessary political clout.

Another strategy is to design institutions so that they are less vulnerable to the effects of political turnover. Bolivia's forest superintendency, created as part of that country's forestry law reforms of 1996, is an example of this approach. To reduce the risk of political manipulation, the superintendent is nominated by the Senate and approved by the president. To promote consistency over time, the appointment lasts for six years, spanning two administrations.

Tethering to Social Constituencies

Reformers attempting to consolidate green policies are not limited to working within state structures. At the broadest level, an important mechanism for durability is the rise of a policy culture — an enduring set of social expectations concerning government action in a particular issue area. With the growth of environmental movements in many non-Western countries, political leaders of all stripes are increasingly expected to address environmental issues. In the Costa Rica of the 1970s, for example, if the president wished to support the national parks, that was laudable but purely optional from a political standpoint. Today, if a Costa Rican president tried to abolish the park system, there would be a national uproar.

Efforts to create a green policy culture depend heavily on non-state actors, such as university scientists, investigative journalists, public interest law firms, organic farmers, professional associations and grassroots advocacy groups. These non-state actors not only broaden awareness of environmental issues but can also serve as an important source of policy continuity. In many countries, NGOs have government-sanctioned roles in managing national parks, monitoring pollution and working with local communities. These groups may also serve as advisors to newly installed political leaders and agency officials, bringing them up to speed on longstanding efforts, advocating for continued financial and political support and offering their technical services as consultants, all of which promote continuity. Crucially, NGOs also provide employment opportunities for reformers to continue developing policy proposals during periods when political shifts prevent their direct participation in government.

Economic constituencies can likewise provide a thread of continuity across administrations. Policies that provide income streams to those who protect natural resources — through ecotourism, community forestry, organic agriculture standards and so forth — create not only economic incentives for sustainable behavior but also political incentives to voice objections if any attempt is made to overturn these policies.

Informal, multipartisan networks among environmentalists are another tool that can be used to ensure consistent advocacy for given policies and programs across successive administrations. Such networks have proven to be an important source of continuity in Costa Rica. There, the boards of directors of environmental NGOs and quasi-state organizations are often explicitly multipartisan in order to bolster the organizations' long-term prospects.

Creating Resilient Networks

Reformers in chronically unstable political systems can improve the odds that their policies will endure by building constituencies and spreading regulatory responsibilities across numerous agencies and levels of government. These linkages can be either horizontal or vertical.

A road is built through the forest to reach oil fields in Ecuador.

Horizontally, the prospects for durability improve when the goals and regulatory routines of new policies aren't confined to a small environmental agency. Traditional government ministries in areas like planning and foreign affairs are stronger than new environmental agencies and therefore better able to withstand social upheaval. In South Africa, for example, officials report that once environmental policy was linked to international trade issues, it became easier to solicit continued high-level support for sustainability.

Vertical tethers can be established both "downward" and "upward." Over the past two decades, dozens of developing countries have decentralized important features of natural resource policy and management to local governments. When a town or regional government has a vested interest in the long-term viability of a protected area (for watershed protection or local tourism, for example), its leaders can be expected to push to safeguard that area despite shifts in national leadership. Strengthening vertical linkages through decentralization does carry risks, however. Local governments are highly susceptible to the influence of resource extraction industries and other powerful economic actors, and local politicians may prioritize short-term income-generating opportunities and their associated political benefits. Thus, it is critical that decentralization be accompanied by national regulatory standards.

Vertical linkages established upward include treaty commitments, participation in transnational advocacy networks and support from international donors. Because organizations like the United Nations Development Program and Conservation International operate outside the domestic political system, they aren't subject to the local pressures threatening domestic environmental institutions. Conversely, foreign organizations lack national roots, and their influence can be quite shallow if other tethers are not secured. To return to the Bolivian example mentioned previously, managers of Bolivia's environmental trust fund did an outstanding job of building an international constituency for their new institution. However, they invested relatively little in building domestic political constituencies that might have been able to prevent the demise of the institution when a new regime came to power.
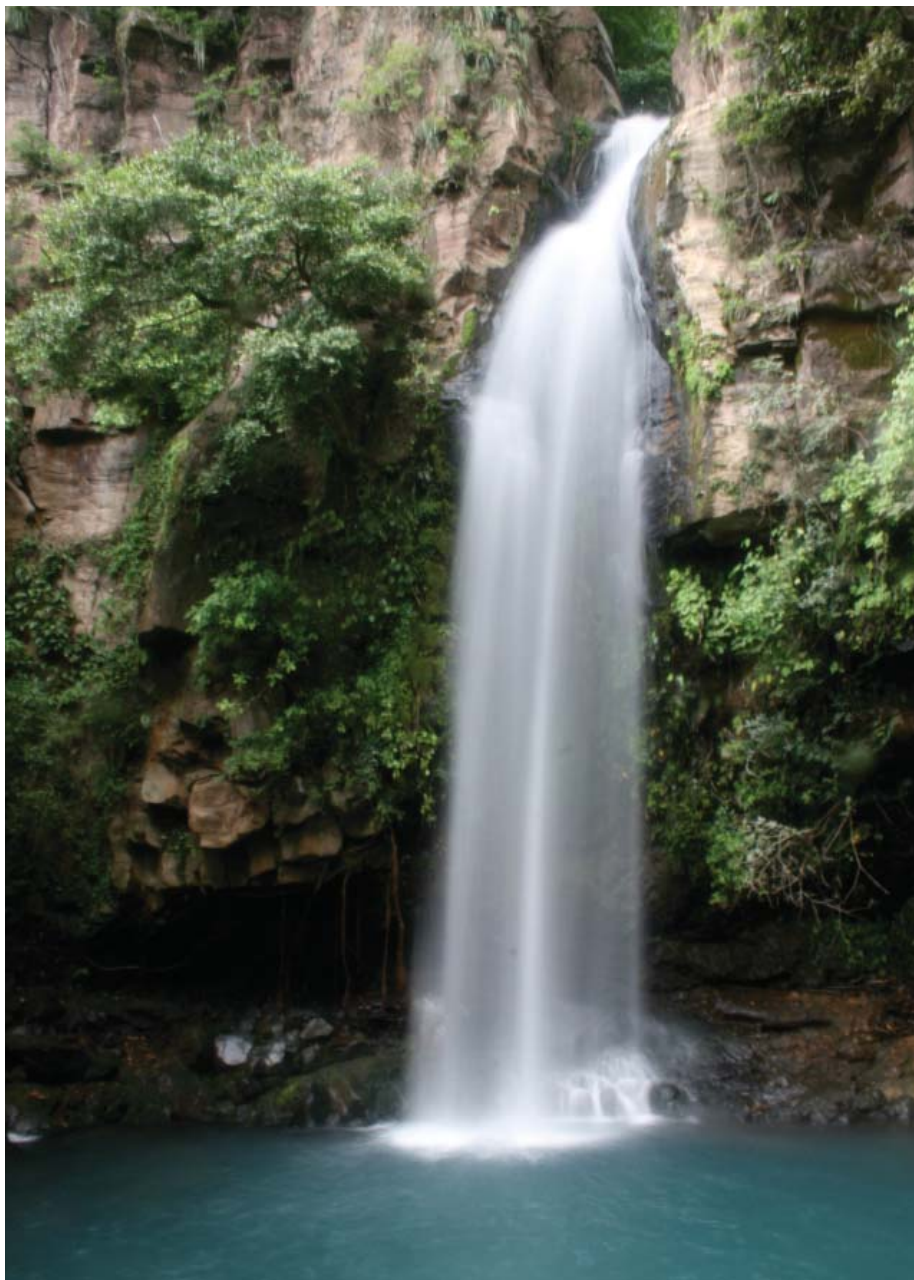
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Photo by J. Griffin Stewart

A waterfall in Santa Rosa National Park, Costa Rica, formerly the property of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.

of the long-term consolidation of environmental institutions. More explicit attention should be given to issues like the design of state agencies, the role of policy-oriented, non-state actors and methods for establishing networks of constituencies outside environmental policy agencies.

For social scientists, there is a need to develop a richer understanding of comparative policy processes. The policy sciences have produced theories of change that bear little resemblance to the conditions experienced by most of the world's people and political systems. Meanwhile, the field of comparative politics has largely shunned policy studies in favor of an emphasis on macro-level phenomena such as democratization. As the challenge for new democracies turns from regime change to the business of governance, socially relevant theory is needed to explore the political processes that promote or impede the provision of public goods. The health of people and of ecosystems depends on state institutions doing the right thing over a sustained period of time. For that to happen, researchers and reformers alike need to clearly understand the obstacles they face and the strategies available to surmount them.

Conclusions

Sustainability requires not merely "political will" on the part of states and societies but sustained institutional responses to long-term policy problems ranging from water shortages to deforestation. Yet activists and policy reformers on the front lines of environmental struggles are often so preoccupied with putting out the latest brush fire — a legislative proposal that has stalled in the senate, a company illegally harvesting timber from a park — that they fail to reflect on the long-term prospects of environmental institutions. Proponents of sustainability in Latin America would do well to think about the decades-long process of reforming state institutions and to develop strategies with this long-term goal in mind. This requires a culture shift for environmental and development organizations and their funders, away from an obsessive focus on short-term objectives and toward a more strategic consideration