

The United Nations Environment Programme in Nairobi, Kenya

Written by Sahil Mathur and Amitav Acharya

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SAHIL MATHUR AND AMITAV ACHARYA, DEC 5 2023

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Most of the global (i.e. not regional) international organisations that appear prominently in the news and feature in scholarly and policy analyses are headquartered in the West. The United Nations, the keystone organisation of the post-war international order, has its headquarters in New York. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), cornerstones of the international economic and financial order, are headquartered in Washington, DC. The main office of the World Trade Organization, which was created in 1995 to replace and carry forward the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, is in Geneva. Geneva, in fact, is a hub for international organisations' headquarters. It is a 'second home' for the United Nations, with several of its agencies including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN Conference on Trade and Development headquartered there. Geneva also houses the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration and the World Health Organization, among others. Other major centres include Paris and Vienna.

These organisations all have global mandates: their activities are not restricted to the West. While they usually have 'field offices' in other, Southern states, their main offices remain in the West. Why is this so? The simple answer is that international organisations are largely Western creations and hence remain centred in the West. Another reason is that developed Western states have more resources to host these large headquarters. This overall narrative suggests that the states of the Global South are passive recipients when it comes to the operations of international organisations.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) was founded in 1972 as a result of the UN Conference on the Human Environment – the first large-scale international summit devoted to discussing environmental issues – held in 1972 at Stockholm. UNEP's purpose is to coordinate activities related to the environment carried out by different United Nations agencies. A key – indeed necessary – point of discussion that followed UNEP's formation was on where to build its new headquarters. All the usual suspects – Geneva, London, New York, Vienna – were in the race and one of these centres seemed the obvious choice. However, to the surprise of most states, the Kenyan permanent representative to the UN Joseph Odera-Jowi not only threw Nairobi's hat in the ring, but launched a defiant bid, forcefully advocating for the new headquarters to be 'given to the Third World'. He argued that the West's monopoly over international organisation headquarters was 'unjust' as the Third World was being denied the opportunity and privilege. In Odera-Jowi's words, 'we are members of the UN, all of us, and all UN headquarters are in USA or Western Europe. None in Asia, none in South America, none in Africa, none in Eastern Europe...[and the reasons behind this] were not technical...but historical and political' (Johnson 2012, 29–31).

Anticipating that the thought of having a global international organisation headquartered in the developing world would be difficult for the West to entertain, Odera-Jowi, along with Kenyan Foreign Minister Njoroge Mungai, actively lobbied for support, first among African countries and then in the G-77 grouping of developing countries (which today has 134 members). After gaining a large number of signatures, the Kenyan delegation filed the draft proposal, which was centred less on Kenya and more on 'justice for the Third World'. Bravely taking on a Western 'whispering

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campaign' that maligned Nairobi for not having adequate hotels or a suitable airport and being 'too far' (from the West), Odera-Jowi defended his proposal with a document detailing Nairobi's world-class facilities, including the upcoming Kenyatta International Convention Centre that would host the headquarters. Realising the force of Kenya's push and the large support it had amassed, all Western cities withdrew their candidatures. Towards the end of the debate, Nairobi's only remaining contender was New Delhi, India. Given its top-level participation at the Stockholm Conference – where Indira Gandhi had given a stirring speech on poverty and need as the biggest polluters – India had aspirations of hosting UNEP. But it eventually agreed to vote for Nairobi as a sign of goodwill and solidarity among the Third World. With that, Nairobi gained its place as the first Southern host to a United Nations headquarters.

The victory notwithstanding, there remained doubts. As one observer wrote, 'lacking the perspective of time, nobody could be sure yet whether the choice of Nairobi was a historic blunder or an act of statesmanship' (Irwin, cited in Johnson 2012, 35). Today, these doubts have abated. Following UNEP, Nairobi was awarded yet another headquarters in 1978 – this time of the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). In 1996, a brand-new building styled as the UN Office at Nairobi – the United Nations' only major office outside the West – was opened to host both UNEP and UN-Habitat (pictured). In addition, that office today has grown to host the regional offices of around 30 other UN agencies. It is, therefore, an understatement to say that Kenya has been a pillar of progress for the United Nations, representing a prominent and visible Southern contribution to global governance.

At the time UNEP was founded, 'global' international organisations formed the epicentre of global governance. Yet, various regional initiatives around the world were also beginning to form. What we see today, therefore, is that rather than Southern countries simply vying to host global international organisations as Nairobi did, we are also witnessing a strengthening, and growth, of 'Southern' international organisations. For example, the AIIB, headquartered in Beijing, is rapidly reaching lending levels similar to the World Bank. Reflecting a multiplex world order, the future of global governance will see multiple centres of power in the Global North and South, at times competing and at other times collaborating in their endeavours. In that sense, the example of Nairobi can be read as not just driving international organisations Southwards, but also as part of a larger direction of travel in international relations towards the Global South.

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