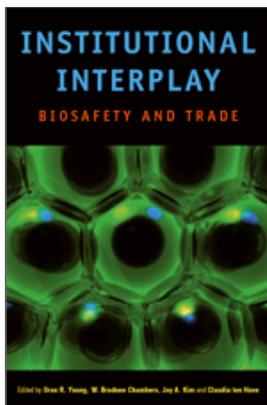


Book review

Institutional interplay: Biosafety and trade

Oran R. YOUNG, W. Bradnee CHAMBERS, Joy A. KIM and Claudia TEN HAVE (eds.)

United Nations University 2008, ISBN: 978-92-808-1148-3; 200 p., http://www.ias.unu.edu/sub_page.aspx?catID=97&ddlID=584



As a former plant biotechnologist now working in biosafety capacity building, when I was first approached by the EBR editor to review this book, I will admit to having had major reservations. What did *I* know about “institutional interplay”, and for that matter, did I actually know what “institutional interplay” *is*?? My ignorance knew no bounds. Now, after having read the book, I am at least aware of

where and what those “bounds” are.

The two regimes at the axis of global biosafety governance, the World Trade Organization (WTO; primarily the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures; the SPS Agreement, 1994) and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB; 2003), are used throughout the book to explore the extent to which these “social institutions” and their sets of practices, rights, rules and procedures can intentionally or unintentionally influence or impact on one another – institutional interplay – especially when they aim to govern overlapping arenas.

With regard to biosafety, the book provides first the institutional and political context within which calls to regulate the safe movement of GMOs emerged, and a description of the complex interests between the various CPB negotiating teams and their awareness of the developing Protocol’s relationship with the WTO. Of interest to note is that unlike the WTO, the CPB has as yet no rules regarding the making of dispute settlement decisions and thus the necessity for the USA, Canada and Argentina to raise their complaint of the EU’s *de facto*

moratorium on the approval of new GMOs – “European Communities Measure Affecting the Approval and Marketing of Biotech Products” – with the WTO in 2003.

The introductory part is then followed by a second which comprises many passages of intensive academic discourses on the various conceptual approaches, definitions and structural types of conceivable interplay, and which will be primarily of interest to scholars but may also be of passing interest to the non-specialist. I personally found some of the esoteric text quite hard-going at times.

The third part of the book attempts to reduce and give some direction to those overtly theoretical aspects of institutional interplay in order to make them more understandable and workable, especially in a biosafety sense.

The final part then focuses on the trade aspects of biosafety institutional interplay, and interestingly not only how the WTO affected the content, operations and effectiveness of the Protocol, and thus the extent to which great care was taken during the negotiations not to subordinate either side to the other, but also how the CPB is beginning to reciprocate with influences of its own in the evolution of the WTO.

Overall, I found the book to be targeting an audience of which I am not an obvious member, but it was sufficiently interspersed with enlightening facts which helped crystallize a degree of coherency for me in the political conflict surrounding the development and deployment of biosafety governance to have kept my interest to the last page. I therefore recommend this book to anyone who is working at the interface of biosafety policy and science.

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