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# Defence of the environment: the new issue in international relations

> Until recently, the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly compartmentalised within nations, within sectors (energy, agriculture, trade), and within broad areas of concern (environmental, economic, social). These compartments have begun to dissolve. This applies to the various global 'crises' that have seized public concern, particularly over the past decade. These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis. They are all one.[1]

The twentieth century may be regarded as being unique in human history because of the application of developments in nuclear physics for both peaceful and warlike purposes and because, during its final quarter, it became generally understood that the biosphere of the planet was being adversely affected by the activities of mankind. In other words, that there was a distinct possibility that the biosphere might not be able to support the present population, indefinitely, at anything like current average standards of living, let alone a rapidly increasing population. Economic growth based on the provision of massive amounts of energy has been the objective of all technological societies regardless of their political orientation. Whether socialist, fascist or social democratic market economies, they are committed to objectives measured in terms of growth which could not be attained in the absence of relatively abundant energy from fossil fuels. It has been estimated that, as a consequence of the pursuit of such growth, global emissions of common air pollutants into the atmosphere as a result of human activities in 1980 consisted of nearly 275 million tonnes of sulphur and nitrogen oxides and carbon monoxide, and over 100 million tonnes of hydrocarbons and particulate matter.[2] In addition, there was a very much larger discharge of carbon dioxide – perhaps more than 5 billion tonnes from the combustion of fossil fuels and as much as 2.5 billion tonnes through deforestation.[3]

The rapid growth of population in this century has brought with it enormous increases in the use of fossil fuels and excessive pressures on land and forests. It has been estimated that industrial production has grown by a factor of fifty since the last decade of the nineteenth century, four-fifths of that growth since 1950.[4]

The consumption of commercial energy, which is basic to increments in production, reflects both the growth of population and the increasing demand of the population for goods and services. Total consumption of energy was estimated to be about 7,400 million tonnes of oil equivalent (t.o.e.) in 1985. Developed countries, with 30 per cent of the world's population, consume 85 per cent of commercial energy. Estimates of future demand suggest that it will be between 9,500 and 12,000 t.o.e. by the year 2000.[5]

The conversion of the very large amounts of coal and hydrocarbons required to produce the greater proportion of the commercial energy required by a growing population will increase the volume of gases and solid wastes which are already known to be injurious to the biosphere.

## Population

The United Nations chose 11 July 1988 to mark the occasion the world's population was estimated to have reached five billion. Half are in Asia. The low and high estimates of stationary population, made by the United Nations, are 8 billion by the year 2080 and 14.2 billion by the year 2130.[6]

During the past thirty years 80 per cent of the growth of world population occurred in the developing countries. 95 per cent of projected growth to the year 2110 is virtually certain to take place in Asia, Latin America and Africa.[7]

When this is considered alongside the pressures which the growing population is putting on soils and forests, it is evident that human society is facing problems which are forcing themselves on governments everywhere. Increasing numbers mean increasing demand for food and feedstuffs because the nutrition of the human population necessitates parallel increases in the population of domestic animals.[8]

There is another very important contributing factor to the processes which are degrading the environment; that is the pressures of a rapid growth in world population. We can no longer afford to assume that the biosphere is capable of supporting five billion people, almost all of them aspiring to higher material standards of living through the utilisation, often very inefficiently, of increasing amounts of energy from fossil fuels. As Robert McNamara has expressed it:

> Unless action is taken to accelerate the reduction of rates of growth, the population of the world will not stabilise below 11 billion, and certain regions and countries will grow far beyond the limits consistent with political stability and acceptable social and economic conditions.[9]

The fundamental international political and economic issues of the next century may be not the east/west conflict/detente, but whether the international community is able to respond to the increasingly threatening degradation of soils, of water systems, of the atmosphere and the loss of forest cover which are a function of the economic activities of the human population.

## International responses to environmental degradation

The international community has not been entirely unresponsive to the problems of the environment during recent decades. But a question should be posed. If environmental problems are of such fundamental concern, why

have they not come to the top of the political agendas before now?

The answer is, probably, that manifestations of concern in the 1960s and early 1970s were not supported by sufficient empirical evidence to have the needed impact on bureaucracies and political leaderships. It was also coincidental that the first peaking of concern coincided with the rise in oil prices engineered by the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).[10] Attention was largely devoted to energy-saving measures. Longer term problems were set aside. Nevertheless, international action in response to the threat of degradation of the environment has gradually been stepped up since 1968. That year the General Assembly of the United Nations, at the initiative of the Swedish government, decided to call a conference on the human environment. The Stockholm Conference, as it became known, met in 1972 to review the work of a preparatory committee which had spent more than two years formulating recommendations under the following headings:

1. planning and management of human settlements, together with non-economic factors such as educational, social and cultural aspects;
2. natural resources and aspects of development;
3. identification and control of pollutants and organisational implications of the measures proposed.

The Conference adopted no less than 106 resolutions which were labelled the international 'Action Plan' for the environment. Briefly, it was divided into three programs: (1) a global assessment known as 'Earthwatch' whose purpose is to identify and measure environmental problems of international importance and to warn against impending crises; (2) environmental management activities implementing measures to protect the environment, and (3) support activities such as educational, financial and organisational measures. All this was complemented by a Declaration on the Human Environment which summarised standards and principles intended to guide the international community in relation to the safeguarding of the global environment.[11]

The following year the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution (No.2997) approving the establishment of an international regime which implemented, at least in part, the recommendations of the Stockholm Conference. What emerged was the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). It has a Council comprising fifty-eight member nations, a Secretariat, located in Nairobi, and is largely dependent on voluntary contributions.[12]

UNEP's work has been supplemented by the work of other international agencies which are part of the United Nations' system: International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Health Organisation (WHO), World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

There were few other highlights in the second half of the 1970s. Governments generally were unconvinced by the evidence, especially in relation to the possibility of climatic change. The agenda suggested by the Stockholm

Conference seemed to have been largely lost from sight. Activity resumed in the early 1980s as evidence began to accumulate that most of the warnings about pollution of lakes, waterways and seas, destruction of forest cover, degradation of land and the consequences of changes in the composition of the atmosphere were being substantiated. Reports about the degradation of national environments, what is more, eventually commanded the attention of politicians in the major countries.

The turning point may well eventually be regarded as the diffusion among decision makers of the major countries of Europe and North America of the conclusions of the conference held at Villach in 1985. It was sponsored by the Beijer Institute and the International Council of Scientific Unions and was supported by the Advisory Group on Greenhouse Gases of WMO and UNEP. The participants considered possible scenarios involving changes of climate and sea levels, effects of climatic change on high and middle latitudes, humid tropics, semi-arid and coastal zones. It also examined tentative strategies for limiting the growth of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (preventative measures) and reduction of the consequences of changes in climate (adaptive measures).[13]

The other development which seems to have influenced governments in the industrial countries was the publicising of the results of the discovery by the British Antarctic Survey of the hole in the ozone layer above the Antarctic Continent.[14] As Mrs Thatcher, the most sceptical of the prominent Western politicians about environmental problems, said when she addressed the Royal Society in London in 1988:

> We don't know the full implications of the ozone hole nor how it may interact with the greenhouse effect. Nevertheless it was common sense to support a worldwide agreement in Montreal last year to halve world consumption of chlorofluorocarbons by the end of the century.[15]

The international community has taken action which, hopefully, will limit, or even eliminate, the production of chlorofluorocarbons. The relevant international documents are The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987) and The Declaration of Intent (1989) agreed at Helsinki by the signatories to the Protocol.[16]

Since the conference at Villach in 1985, governments have begun to accept that global warming as a consequence of the massive use of fossil fuels is no longer an hypothesis. It has become accepted that it is a possibility. Governments are beginning to contemplate the prospects of changes in climate and significant rises in sea levels. Interest in the issues listed in the Action Plan proposed by the Stockholm Conference had shown signs of revival the previous year when the General Assembly of the United Nations established the World Commission on Environment and Development.[17]

Its report was published in 1987. It has become very widely known, being reprinted six times that year and twice in 1988. Its authors made, among other things, the following points in a Declaration they issued in Tokyo at the conclusion of their work:

> **Revive Growth**. Poverty is a major source of environmental degradation ...

economic growth must be stimulated, particularly in developing countries, while enhancing the environmental resource base.

**Change the Quality of Growth**. Growth must be of a new kind in which sustainability, equity, social justice and security are firmly embedded as major social goals.

**Conserve and Enhance the Resource Base**. Sustainability requires the conservation of environmental resources such as clean air, water, forests and soils; maintaining genetic diversity; and using energy, water, and raw materials efficiently. Improvement in the efficiency of production must be accelerated to reduce per capita consumption of natural resources and encourage a shift to non-polluting products and technologies.

**Ensure a Sustainable Level of Population**. Population policies should be formulated and integrated with other economic and social development programs.

**Reorient Technology and Manage Risks.** The orientation of technology development ... must be changed to pay greater regard to environmental factors. National and international institutional mechanisms are needed to assess potential impacts of new technologies before they are widely used.

**Integrate Environment and Economics in Decision-Making**. Environmental and economic goals can and must be made mutually reinforcing ... Those making ... policy decisions must be responsible for the impact of those decisions upon the environmental resource capital of their nations. They must focus on the sources of environmental damage rather than the symptoms.

**Reform International Economic Relations.** Long-term sustainable growth will require far-reaching changes to produce trade, capital and technology flows that are more equitable and better synchronised to environmental imperatives ... improvements in market access, technology transfer, and international finance are necessary to help developing countries.

**Strengthen Internation Cooperation**. Higher priorities must be assigned to international monitoring, assessment, research and development and resource management ... this requires a high level of commitment ... to the satisfactory working of multilateral institutions, to the making and observance of international rules...and to constructive dialogue on the many issues where national interests do not immediately coincide but require negotiation to be reconciled.[18]

It is unusual in international affairs for a United Nations report like 'Our Common Future', which could easily have been dismissed as a 'green motherhood' manifesto, to be followed-up within a relatively short period of time by a Declaration by twenty-four countries including key members of the European Community (West Germany, France, Spain and Italy), Japan, India, Brazil and Indonesia which picked up the call, as far as the atmosphere is concerned, for effective international action in 'Our Common Future'. In 'The Declaration of the Hague on the Protection of the Atmosphere' the twenty four countries agreed to promote the following objectives:

1. Develop within the United Nations a **new institutional authority** ... which in the context of the preservation of the Earth's atmosphere, shall be responsible for combatting any further warming of the atmosphere and shall involve such decision-making procedures as may be effective even if, on occasion, unanimous agreement has not been reached.
2. Enable the institutional authority to undertake or **commission necessary studies**...

3. Sponsor measures to ensure the **effective implementation of and compliance with the decisions of the new institutional authority**.
4. Ensure that in cases where countries will have to accept, in view of their level of development, an abnormal or special burden in taking action to protect the atmosphere, shall receive fair and equitable assistance to compensate them for bearing such burden.
5. Work for the **negotiation of the necessary legal instruments** to provide an effective and coherent foundation, institutionally and financially, for the achievement of the agreed objectives.[19] [Author's emphases]

It seems that the leaderships of the major western industrial countries , the Group of Seven, or G7, as it is known, (United States, Japan, Britain, France, West Germany, Italy and Canada), are apparently now convinced that collective action to protect the world environment is a priority. In a communique released at the conclusion of the meeting held in July 1989, they noted that there is growing awareness throughout the world to preserve better the global ecological balance. It was agreed that decisive action is urgently needed to understand and protect the earth's ecological balance and, in particular, that the depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer is alarming and calls for prompt action. Having noted the need to achieve sustainable development and to ensure the compatibility of economic growth and development with the protection of the environment, the G7 agreed:

1. To encourage the World Bank and regional development banks to integrate environmental considerations into their activities.
2. To ask the OECD to examine how selected environmental indicators could be developed.
3. To help developing countries deal with past damage and to encourage environmentally desirable action. (In special cases debt forgiveness and debt for nature swaps could play a useful role.)
4. To advocate common efforts to limit emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.
5. To strengthen the worldwide network of observatories for greenhouse gases.
6. To endorse the proposition that increasing energy efficiency could make a substantial contribution to environmental goals.
7. To foster common efforts to reverse deforestation (The preservation of tropical forests is an urgent need for the world as a whole and the Tropical Forest Action Plan deserves specific support.)
8. To support action to protect temperate forests and lakes from the effects of acid pollutants.
9. To encourage the maintenance of the highest standards for the safe operation of nuclear power plants.
10. To condemn the indiscriminate use of the oceans as dumping grounds for waste and to call for the sustainable management of marine environments.
11. To support a framework or umbrella convention on climate change so as to mobilise and rationalise efforts being made by the international community.
12. To strengthen existing environment institutions, notably the UNEP.[20]

A significant aspect of the recent acknowledgement by political leaderships that environmental issues are of crucial international importance, is that the initiative has come from Western Europe. The convenor of the World Commission on Environment and Development and Prime Minister of

Norway, Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland, President Mitterand of France and the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mr Ruud Lubbers, were the moving forces behind the meeting in the Netherlands which produced the Hague Declaration of 1989. In 1988, the Prime Minister of Britain, Mrs Thatcher spoke, as mentioned above, about modern technology triggering, unwittingly, a massive experiment with the planet itself and went as far as to suggest that decisive action is needed to protect the environment.[21]

In Eastern Europe, there was an even earlier call to action. Mr Gorbachev wrote in his book *Perestroika* about the emergence and aggravation of the so-called global issues 'which', as he put it, 'have become vital to the destinies of civilisation'. He also spoke of 'the critical condition of the environment, of the air basin and the oceans, and of our planet's traditional resources which have turned out not to be limitless'. He revealed an understanding that there is now an imperative to pool the efforts of mankind for the preservation of the planet and acknowledged that environmental problems had crossed national boundaries. They were now shared by all Europe.[22]

On the other side of the Atlantic, President Reagan had declined during his terms of office to concede any priority to domestic, let alone international environmental issues. The Global 2000 Report to the President[23], commissioned by President Carter lay on the desk at the White House until 1989. In Europe, however, governments were confronted with trans-boundary problems which could not be ignored by politicians – acid rain damage to forests and lakes, pollution of major rivers and the landlocked seas, degradation of fresh water reservoirs, degradation of soils through excessive use of chemical fertilisers, problems of waste disposal in both agricultural and urban environments and the safety of nuclear plants and the disposal of their wastes. Environmental problems were becoming more serious, if anything, in Eastern Europe, where it has become acknowledged that state planning systems seldom, if ever, took environmental considerations into account in the design of major industrial projects or in agricultural and forest development schemes. Problems have become worse as equipment has aged, especially coal burning equipment, and as the lack of adequate controls over the disposal of solid wastes and effluents has had its slow but debilitating effect on the economies.[24]

## The global environmental prospect

The present perception of global and regional environmental problems seems to have been influenced largely by warnings about global warming - the 'greenhouse' problem. While that is not inappropriate, the deluge of information about the medium to longterm dangers of atmospheric change, has tended to obscure the more immediate set of problems caused by the growth of population in the developing world and failure of the industrialised countries to limit the emissions of gases and wastes which are dangerous to plants and to water systems.

There will be two lists of issues on the international environmental agenda of the 1990s, the first divisive, the second possibly giving a strong impetus

to international cooperation.

The divisive issues will include (1) environmental degradation manifested in problems over basic resources, notably water, (2) the possibility of food and fuel deficits which cause the number of environmental refugees to increase, (3) social and consequent political instability particularly in those countries whose economic systems are incapable of sufficiently rapid adjustment and (4) exacerbation of the already serious tension between the countries of the developing world and the industrialised countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development who are regarded with justification by the former as largely responsible for the deterioration of the environment because of their prodigious demand for energy.

The growing understanding among the OECD countries that:

- they are consuming too much energy,
- the problem of developing country debt must be solved if environmental questions are properly to be addressed,
- the UNEP, or a substitute for it, must become an effective instrument of international action, and
- international law in relation to the environment must be capable of enforcement,

may provide an incentive to cooperate.

## The divisive issues

Apart from tension between the haves and those that do not have very much, mentioned above, over responsibility for the deterioration of the global environment, it is becoming increasingly apparent that disputes over resources, especially water resources, are a growing source of international tension. One estimate points to the fact that 40 per cent of the world's population depends on some two hundred river systems shared by two or more countries. Twelve major basins are shared by five or more countries. The major focal points are the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Danube, Rhine and Ganges-Bhramaputra systems. In the case of the Nile and the Tigris and Euphrates degradation of the watersheds and diversion of upstream waters are regarded as threatening in downstream and delta countries. In Europe the problem is mainly pollution but there is dispute between Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania about further major dam construction on the Danube.[25] In the Indian subcontinent, it stems largely from devastation of mountain and hill-country forest cover.

Degradation of land and of water systems threatens food security in the medium and long run. It would be idle to suggest that an increasing proportion of the nutritional requirements of developing countries can be met by imports. Few of them generate sufficient export income to be able to import significant amounts of food. Their future economic well-being and social stability, almost without exception, depends on domestic agriculture being able to supply most of the necessities. The international community, moreover, can no longer afford to assume that the combination of improved water and soil management, improved varieties of seed and availability of

relatively inexpensive chemical fertilisers, the basis of the so-called 'green revolution' in agriculture, will enable production to keep pace with increasing populations of human beings and their livestock unless desertification and the degradation of well-watered lands are reversed.[26]

Social instability, leading to eventual political instability, in countries where the living conditions of a majority of the populations are likely to deteriorate is another medium-term danger, especially in Asia, Latin America and Africa. If conditions in Bangladesh, for example, further deteriorate because of the inability of riparian countries to control the flows of the major river system of the subcontinent, what are the prospects for that region? Will the decay of industries characteristic of the economies of the Soviet Bloc countries in Central Europe adversely affect the security of that continent? How will the international community cope with the growing numbers of environmental refugees desperately seeking to cross borders or escape to other countries by sea in the search for the basics of a secure existence. There are already numerous examples – people from Mexico and other Latin American countries and from the Caribbean attempting by any means available to them to gain entry to the United States,[27] Ethiopians moving into the Sudan, Vietnamese seeking to get to other countries via Hong Kong.[28]

As one commentator has put it:

> In the Third World, population growth, poverty, and ill conceived development policies are the root cause of environmental degradation. The large and growing number of refugees worldwide that has resulted from these trends is living evidence of a continuing decline in the earth's habitation.[29]

The international agenda for the nineties must also surely include the possible exacerbation of tension between the OECD countries and the genuinely oil rich of the Saudi Arabian peninsula, on the one hand, and the developing countries on the other, especially if the former fail to come up with a solution to the problem of Third World debt. The indebted developing countries, quite appropriately, regard the OECD countries and the industrialised members of the Soviet Bloc as the sources of emissions and wastes which are largely responsible for the degradation of the atmosphere and the seas. They are also disillusioned with the economic development prescriptions which have, over time, come to be seen as worsening rather than ameliorating their problems.

The other source of likely tension may be between those countries with low birthrates and those in which, for religious or other reasons, populations are still growing rapidly.

## Prospects for international cooperation

The acknowledged gravity of environmental problems might bring about a strengthening of the international system during the 1990s. There are already signs that East/West tensions are lessening and not just because of progress between the Superpowers on disarmament. There seems to be a recognition in the Soviet Union that many of the problems it is having to address domestically have their origins in the flouting by the central planning system, and the energy, steel and agricultural industries, of the basic precepts of

environmental protection. In a wider context, the Soviet Foreign Minister expressed appreciation of the global significance of developments in the industrial countries when he said at the United Nations in 1988:

> ... all the environmental disasters of the current year have placed in the forefront the task of pooling and coordinating efforts in developing a global strategy for the rational management of the environment.[30]

It remains now to be seen whether the major powers, that is the members of the G7, the Soviet Union and India, will agree to implement the principles of the Hague Declaration. What they involve is basically:

- The negotiation of enforceable international law for the atmosphere, for the oceans and for landlocked seas, for the protection of forests and the prevention of the degradation of river systems.
- The establishment of international machinery which will ensure effective cooperation as the world community adjusts to the imperative of evolving policies based on sustainable economic growth.

That is an immensely tall order. Nothing in twentieth century history could possibly provide grounds for confidence that the collective political leadership that is needed will emerge from the decades of war, both hot and cold. Will, for example, the G7 evolve into a G12 perhaps including China, India, Brazil, Mexico and, of course, the Soviet Union? Was Mr Gorbachev's letter to President Mitterand when the G7 met in Paris in July 1989 a signal that the unthinkable might become the thinkable in the 1990s?[31] But that would involve an evolution in international politics which the leaders in Western Europe and the United States would probably find so novel that it would unnerve them. If it were thought appropriate to use the machinery of the United Nations, is it realistic to contemplate the moribund Economic and Social Council evolving into an Environmental Security Council? Could it conceivably be given powers to enforce the international law which may have been successfully negotiated by its members? That is perhaps the most difficult of the problems of international law.

Finally, consider the possible role of the international economic institutions in the 1990s – the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Bank. Will GATT be able to adjust to an international economy where it might be necessary, either through the coordination of taxation policies or by formal international agreement, to provide maximum incentives for achieving major reductions in the utilisation of fossil fuels? Politically, this is tantamount to suggesting that the world economy be turned upside down. Is it within the bounds of practical international politics to implement an international regime which will make commodities still in ample supply, such as coal and oil, so expensive in the hands of the energy, steel, cement and transport and other industries, that there will be a significant decline in the output of greenhouse and other gases?

As far as the World Bank is concerned, the debt problem is on its agenda and it now acknowledges that many of the projects it has financed are environmentally unsound.

Perhaps consuming man will accept the imperatives of international

cooperation and begin to adjust to the need for fundamental changes of attitude, especially among both Marxist and market economists and the politicians they advise, so as to turn the international community towards policies of sustainable economic growth. That is going to be exceptionally hard to achieve if the world population continues the exponential trend which began two centuries ago.

## Footnotes

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