

The Environment and Development

by

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It can be seen that people all over the world are becoming more and more concerned about the quality of their environment. The environmental tragedies and accidents which have occurred in recent years have created a sense of awareness in the minds of the people that the quality of air, water and a wide range of other natural resources are being seriously degraded. The health of people everywhere is being threatened by the disposal of hazardous chemicals on land, air and water. The fact that the human population will reach six billion by the year 2000, has heightened this sense of the deterioration of the natural resources on which human life itself depends. Demographic prediction shows that by the end of this century, global ecosystems would have to provide enough fresh air, potable water, arable land, minerals and other natural resources to feed, clothe, house and provide a decent standard of living for over six billion people. Thus it becomes apparent to individuals and governments around the world that if the well-being of future generations is to be assured, past approaches of economic growth and past methods of natural resources exploitation have to be modified and past rates of population growth have to be reduced.

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972, was the first comprehensive international attempt to articulate the inter-relationships between the quality of the environment, a growing world population, and the world economic growth needed to sustain it. More important, the conference recognised the need for specific national and international actions to ensure that economic growth was planned in full appreciation of the long-term value of environment protection and natural resources conservation.

Over the past decade, nations, all over the world have been particularly concerned about the quality and sustainability of their natural resources. There has been wide recognition that economic and social development can be sustained only if environmental concerns are integrated with the development process. It has been understood that environment and development are not separate challenges, but they

are closely linked with each other. Development cannot subsist upon a deteriorating environmental resource base, and the environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out of account the cost of environmental destruction. The problems related to environmental degradation and destruction and the questions of environmental management and development, cannot be treated separately by fragmented institutional policies, because they are interlinked in a complex system of cause and effect. It is well-known that environmental stresses are linked one to another. Air pollution and acid rain play their part in killing forests and lakes. Deforestation causes increased run off which accelerates soil erosion and silting up of rivers and lakes. Such links mean that several different problems must be tackled simultaneously and the success in one area such as forest protection, can improve chances of success in another area such as soil conservation. Similarly environmental stresses and patterns of economic development are linked to one another, for instance, agricultural policies may lie at the root of land, water and forest degradation. Energy policies are associated with deforestation for fuel wood and gasification in many developing countries. These stresses all threaten economic development. Thus economics and ecology must be completely integrated in decision making and law making processes not just to protect the environment, but also to protect and promote development. It should be noted that environmental and economic problems are also linked to many social and political factors. For example, the rapid population growth that has so profound an impact on the environment and on development in many regions, is driven partly by such factors as the status of women in society and other cultural value. Also, environmental stress and uneven development can increase social tension. Hence new approaches must involve programmes of social development, particularly to improve the position of women in society, to protect vulnerable groups and promote their participation in the process of development.

It has to be mentioned that the international features and nature of environmental problems have become more significant in recent years. National boundaries have become so porous that traditional distinction between matters of local, national and international significance have become blurred. Eco-systems do not respect national boundaries. Water pollution moves through shared rivers, lakes and seas. The atmosphere carries air pollution over vast distances. Major accidents particularly

those at nuclear and chemical plant or warehouses containing toxic material, can have widespread regional effects.

It has been the usual practice in the past that environmental management mainly focussed upon redevelopment activities such as re-forestation, reclaiming desert lands, rebuilding urban environment, restoring natural habitat or rehabilitation of wild lands, and still in most countries environmental policies are directed at the symptoms of harmful growth. Certainly these policies have brought progress and rewards and must be continued and strengthened but that will not be sufficient. What is required is a new approach in which all nations aim at a type of development that integrates production with resource conservation and enhancement.

The concept of sustainable development provides a framework for the integration of environment policies and development strategies. Such integration is required in all countries, whether developed or developing. Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future. While every effort should be made to bring the material benefit of modern science and technology to enhance the standard of living of the people, a less wasteful development pattern must be applied

Governments must ensure that their policies, programmes and budgets support development that is economically and ecologically sustainable. Similarly, the various international and regional organisations should try to integrate environment, fully in their goals and activities. New regional arrangements will especially be needed among countries to deal with trans-boundary environmental issues. All major international bodies and agencies should also ensure that their programmes encourage and support sustainable development and improve their co-ordination and co-operation.

Governments should reinforce the role and capacities of environmental protection and resource management agencies. This is needed in most countries, particularly the developing countries, which need assistance in strengthening their institutions. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and regional organisations such as SACEP

should be strengthened as the main sources on environmental data, assessment and reporting, and as the principal advocate and agent for change and international co-operation on critical environment and natural resource protection issues.

The capacity to identify, assess and report on risks of irreversible damage to the ecosystems and threats to the survival, security and well being of the world community must be rapidly reinforced and extended. Governments now need to fill major gaps in existing national and international laws and legislations related to the environment, to find ways to recognise and protect the rights of present and future generations to an environment adequate to their health and well being. A universal declaration has to be prepared on environmental protection and sustainable development and suitable conventions should be adopted for strengthening the procedures for resolving disputes on environmental issues. The need for increased environmental awareness amongst all people, and environmental education, has been recognised during the last two decades. The Governments in concert with the international organisations, non-governmental organisation private and commercial enterprises and the mass media, have to ensure that the public receives accurate and up-to-date information upon which they can act and in a form which can be easily understood. International organisations and multilateral financial institutions have a crucial role to play and they should reorient their programmes towards greater environmental concern. This has to be accompanied by a fundamental commitment to sustainable development as a central goal of these institutions. Similarly, a new priority and focus is also needed in bilateral aid agencies.

Conservation and protection of the environment is not the responsibility of one country or a group of countries. All countries will have to play an active role in this quest and nurture the environmental patrimony which the present generation has inherited, so that it will not be the last generation to enjoy it.