

## Reflections on the Role and Future of UNEP

Twenty years ago the international community called into being a small organization to help it to tackle grave environmental problems that could not be dealt with by States acting on their own. Since then UNEP — the United Nations Environment Programme — has been asked to deal with numerous issues ranging from biological diversity to stratospheric ozone depletion ‘and beyond’.

Nowadays almost everybody claims to be ‘green’; but how much has really changed? True, there is an impressive array of scientific programmes of research and investigation concerning the global environmental impact of human action under way particularly since 1972. Some have led to instruments for regional programmes, national controls, and international cooperation to manage the effects of industrial, agricultural, and social, activities. UNEP has acted as the catalyst and, often, activator.

An early success was scored in the Mediterranean, for which UNEP developed a comprehensive ‘Blue Plan’. Under the Blue Plan, the Mediterranean, which was once on the brink of becoming a dead sea, is now slowly recovering from decades of abuse.

### *Saving Species and the Ozone Shield*

Since the early 1970s, UNEP has also administered CITES — an international convention to protect endangered plants and animals from the threat of uncontrolled trade. The Bengal Tiger (*Felis tigris*), the great spotted cats, and the African Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), have all been brought back from the edge of extinction, thanks largely to CITES. A top priority now is to save the Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*), whose numbers have fallen by some 85% in recent decades.

During the 1980s, UNEP was particularly active in the area of environmental law. Our greatest success was the package of international agreements designed to protect the ozone layer — agreements which are now seen as a model for international environmental law. Under UNEP’s auspices, ozone-depleting chemicals, including chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), were slated for elimination. Compliance is strong, and the switch to substitutes is happening quickly. Even developing countries, which would not otherwise have been able to comply with the strict phase-out schedule, have been given the time and the resources which they need to play their part in protecting the Earth’s ozone shield.

Lessons learned in negotiating a global agreement on the stratospheric ozone layer have now been transferred to other fields, including climate change and biological diversity. UNEP is particularly disturbed by the assault on the world’s biological resources. For the first time in some 55 million years, the number of species on Earth appears to be declining — now at a rate that may be in the dozens every day. With this in mind we have fostered a Convention on Biological Diversity, which has been signed by 157 nations — more than almost any other treaty in the world. It goes beyond CITES in establishing a mechanism for the protection of vital genetic resources in their natural habitats.

Despite these and other achievements, however, the widespread deterioration of the environment since the early ’70s presents a bleak picture. Renewable resources are particularly vulnerable: the Earth’s forest cover is at its lowest since the last ice-age; the global fish-stock is shrinking fast; and *per caput* food production is now falling for the first time in many years. Industry continues to attack the environment, albeit often unwittingly. Air and water pollution, decreasing in the richest countries, is increasing alarmingly in many of the less-developed countries which are home to over three-quarters of the world’s population.

### *Patching-up Environmental Ills*

Overconsumption especially by the rich nations threatens to squander the world’s natural patrimony. The richest 20% of the world’s population consumes over 80% of its resources. Meanwhile the poor — whose numbers are now greater than at any time in the past — continue to destroy their resources, often simply to survive. Until the cycle of poverty is broken, the destruction will continue. The next 20 years must see more than a continuation of the ‘patching-up’ process that has dominated the past 20 years. Production processes, economic development, and international relations, have to move away from the present pattern of destruction.

The foundations for a new departure exist and are widely in place now that there is a rather general realization that neoclassical economics can lead planners towards badly-flawed decisions. Reforms are long overdue in the System of National Accounts, in the calculation of the discount rate, and in controls on the externalization of environmental costs. These reforms must be activated, with public awareness of the need for action and change duly developed. In the area of international relations, environmental agreements must be strengthened and even on-site verification should be considered. There must be a systematic mechanism for enabling developing countries to comply with agreements, for without their full participation the global environment will continue to deteriorate.

### *Need for Political Muscle*

The task at hand will require a much greater commitment on the part of Governments, industry, and more basic bottom-up 'grassroots', than we have seen so far. Governments and international organizations have a crucial role to play; but in the long run, it is the responses of people, both individually and at the community level, which hold the key to our future and to that of later generations. It is the level of awareness and the individual perceptions of people that will ultimately determine whether or not Governments and businesses will adequately integrate environmental concerns into their development plans and economic activities.

Amongst the public at large there is today an upsurge of interest in doing things to save our Biosphere. Nongovernmental organizations, grassroots (bottom-up) movements such as the Chipko (tree-hugging) movement in India and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya to save trees, have mobilized public opinion. Even political parties and multinational corporations say they want to help. Yet there has been too little action despite all the talk.

What rich countries perceive as an environmental crisis is nothing new to hundreds of millions of people in poor countries, who have long experienced hunger, poverty, and degradation of natural resources with economic exploitation, and whose suffering is still increasing. The tragedy of drought in Somalia, Ethiopia, Northern Kenya, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, is but an example. We have the means to prevent environmental degradation and human suffering but we also need the political will.

### *A Mandate for the Future*

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as the 'Earth Summit', was the largest such event in history, with far more than 100 heads of State or Government attending. It called for a unified world effort to save the planet, aiming at nothing less than a fusing of the needs of the Earth with the growing demands for economic development by its human inhabitants. In this framework, UNCED in its 'Agenda 21' gave Governments and UN agencies a broad mandate to address aggressively the problems of environment and development, and gave UNEP and its Governing Council an enhanced and strengthened role to provide policy-guidance and coordination on the environment, taking into account the development perspective.

What is needed now are specific commitments to take specific actions over specific periods of time. The ability of The Biosphere to continue to support human life is seriously in question, which fact should compel us to implement the needed actions outlined above. Nothing less will suffice. If the world is ready to take advantage of this last-chance opportunity to act, then the next 20 years may tell a happier story.

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\* For 17 years until 31 December 1992, and to whom we wish to pay the highest possible tribute for his multiple services to Man and Nature. — Ed.



More than 20 years ago, delegates entered the Swedish Riksdag (Parliament) building in Stockholm where the Stockholm declaration was signed at the end of negotiating sessions from 5–12 June 1972. Since then 'Stockholm' has meant more to environmentalists throughout the world than almost any other word, and the UNEP emblem overhanging the entrance has become universally recognized and widely admired. — Ed.