

Environment

The inability of the international community to deal with most global environmental issues reveals the contradictory nature of the "sustainable development" consensus and demonstrates the limits of international cooperation in the name of the environment. For the first time, environmental degradation provoked by economic growth was considered from a global perspective, going beyond the occasional questioning of pollution problems during the 1950s and 1960s.

A significant feature of international politics since the end of the 1980s has been the growing concern with environmental protection and the multiplication of the number of international conferences and agreements in this area. Environmental protection is presently recognized as a major political issue, and has acquired a well-defined position on the international political agenda.

At the same time, global conventions on Climate Change and Biological Diversity were negotiated in an attempt to control the most devastating effects of economic activities, such as CO₂ emissions from industry and consumers, and to protect the earth's living capacity. To facilitate the transition towards "sustainable development," developed countries promised large sums of money in the form of aid, investment and pollution control projects.

As early as 1972, a United Nations Conference on the Human Environment took place in Stockholm, launching the era of international environmental negotiations. Stockholm did produce some significant outcomes, leading to the creation of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), based in Nairobi, which coordinates environmental action within the United Nations. The context of the Stockholm Conference was not very favorable to the adoption of strong environmental commitments. Developing countries were unsatisfied with the UN system and preparing the movement for a New International Economic Order. The oil crisis of the 1970s relegated environmental protection to a marginal position in international relations.

The World Commission on Environment and Development was established in 1983 under the presidency of Gro Harlem Brundtland, and asked to produce a comprehensive report on the situation of the environment at the global level. The work of the Commission represented a landmark in international initiatives to promote environmental protection as it produced the concept of sustainable development, a concept that would become the basis of environmental politics worldwide. Sustainable development is defined by the Brundtland Report as a development that is "consistent with future as well as present needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987).

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992, was a unique moment in diplomatic history. The conference heralded the most elaborate attempt ever to develop institutional solutions to major environmental problems. A global bargain was struck, according to which developed nations would provide some financial resources and transfer appropriate and "clean" technology to developing countries to help them protect their environments.

Twenty years after the 1972 Stockholm Conference, which was on the "Human Environment," Rio meant a real shift in the vision that had dominated environmental politics so far. After Rio, environmental considerations became incorporated into development, and a "global bargain" was struck between North and South on the basis of the acceptance from both sides of the desirability of achieving a truly global economy which would guarantee growth and better environmental records to all.

The major result of UNCED is called "Agenda 21," a 700-page global plan of action which should guide countries towards sustainability through the 21st century, encompassing virtually every sector affecting environment and development. Besides Agenda 21, UNCED produced two non-binding documents, the "Rio Declaration" and the Forest Principles. In addition, the climate change and the biodiversity conventions, which were negotiated independently of the UNCED process in different fora, were opened for signature during the Rio Summit and are considered UNCED-related agreements.

The "Rio Declaration," which was the subject of much dispute between the Group of 77 (the coalition of developing countries) and industrialized countries, mainly the United States, illustrates well the kind of bargain reached in Rio. Despite the failure of the G77 to win

significant concessions on financial resources, if one considers the differences in priorities between developed and developing countries and the conflictual character of the negotiation process, UNCED's outcomes were still seen by the international establishment as quite impressive, marking "an important new stage in the longer-term development of national and international norms and institutions needed to meet the challenge of environmentally sustainable development." (Porter and Brown 1996, 129).

In June 1997 Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly dedicated to the review of UNCED's implementation, the climate was rather different. Optimism had given way to disappointment and, in some cases; there was real concern about the viability of the "sustainable development" model, which relies on a framework of action that does not fully address the causes of environmental destruction. Developed countries have been unable or unwilling to stick to their promise of increasing the aid to development to 0.7% of GDP, as agreed in Rio.

Countries like the United States, the largest contributor to global warming, had not shown the will to take effective action that would show a real commitment to reduce their industrial emissions. On the other hand, developing countries refused to take any further steps without the guarantee that substantive financial resources would back them or that at least the commitments taken in Rio would be respected. The New York 1997 Declaration even recognized that the situation of the environment had deteriorated over the intervening five years, hoping modestly that more progress would be achieved by the next summit in 2002.

A Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was established to monitor and report on progress towards implementing UNCED's decisions. The World Bank, which has a long history of contributing to environmental degradation by financing destructive projects, went through a "greening" process, and now has a "Department of the Environment" which conducts "environmental impact assessments" and imposes "environmental conditionalities" before granting loans. The World Trade Organization has a "Committee on Trade and Environment"(CTE) which is in charge of ensuring that open trade and environmental protection are mutually supportive.

NGOs organized many demonstrations protesting against the modest results of the official summit and elaborated their own agenda for improving environmental protection worldwide. Yet, in the eyes of some observers, NGO efforts tended to become co-opted by larger and richer groups from advanced countries, which had more means, not only financially but also in terms of organizational, scientific and research capacity, to promote their own views. The representation at the Global Forum was also very unequal, illustrating differences in means between northern NGOs, very present, and southern NGOs. Asian, and above all, African NGOs, were severely under-represented.

The issue of sovereignty had long been a major source of tension during international environmental negotiations. Some Third World countries are still marked by a "developmentalist" ideology in which economic development comes before all else. In addition, resource rich countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, or Brazil, have traditionally had a vision of unending and expanding frontiers, in which land and natural resources are unlimited and no constraints are seen to exist on the use of resources. As a result, they were unwilling to accept the elaboration of international regimes aiming at limiting their sovereignty over the exploitation of natural resources.

As influential economic agents, transnational corporations (TNCs) have activities that directly impact on the situation of the environment. TNCs have been a constant target of NGOs, which point out their preponderant role in environmental degradation. Several public campaigns and boycotts have been organized to draw the public's attention on the issue and force TNCs to comply with legislation, adopt higher environmental standards or change production processes.

On the issue of tropical deforestation for example, NGOs have pointed out that corporations such as British Petroleum, Shell or Mitsubishi bear a large responsibility for forest devastation worldwide. Already in 1989, The Sunday Times directly accused British Petroleum and Shell of contributing to the depletion of the Amazonian rainforest in Brazil. More recently, the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) accused Mitsubishi, together with its subsidiary Meiwa, of being "the greatest corporate threat to the world's tropical, temperate

and boreal forests." RAN accuses Mitsubishi of illegal logging, transfer pricing, tax evasion, violations of pollution standards, anti-trust activity, violation of native land claims, and employment of illegal aliens.

Yet despite evidence of the role of corporations in environmental degradation, the issue was scarcely discussed and questioned during the UNCED process. There is, it is true, a chapter in Agenda 21 dedicated to the role of business and industry. Yet the document does not in any way blame business for its major contribution to the ecological crisis. Agenda 21 contents itself with providing guidelines to firms in order to help them improve their environmental records.

But this is not to say that business and industry were absent or uninterested in the negotiation. On the contrary, large corporations were very active in the UNCED process, and even before it. As early as 1984 a World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (WICEM I) had been organized in France to recommend actions to include environmental concerns in industry planning. The corporations agreed that there should be convergence, and not conflict, between economic development and environmental protection, and launched the Business Charter for Sustainable Development. In 1990, the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD) was created as a group of 48 chief executive officers of corporations from all regions of the world, some of them with a rather negative environmental record, including Chevron, Volkswagen, Nissan, Nippon, Mitsubishi, Dow, Shell, CVRD, Aracruz, and Axel Johnson.

Five years after Rio, as foreseen at UNCED, the review of UNCED's implementation culminated with the June 1997 New York Summit, often referred to as "Earth Summit II." Earth Summit II's official name is UNGASS, United Nations General Assembly Special Session. During UNGASS, five years of work of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) were presented, including a report by the Secretary-General assessing the progress achieved in the implementation of Agenda 21 and recommendations for future action and priorities.

Yet it only adopted a document, the "Program for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21," and did not produce a political statement or binding commitments needed to reverse

unsustainable trends. The text acknowledges that, five years after UNCED, the state of the global environment has continued to deteriorate, and reviews the situation in all areas of action. Not only did the conference show the little progress accomplished in five years, it also failed to commit governments to significant concrete action and to provide means for implementing Agenda 21.

The US was also the target of much criticism for failing to commit to effectively fighting global warming and to accept concrete reductions in levels of greenhouse gas emissions. At the end of the climate negotiations, no legally binding commitments to target and timetables emerged, and the conference only produced a watery compromise to seek satisfactory results at the then forthcoming Kyoto Conference on Climate Change, which took place in December 1997. In short, on most major issues at stake, New York 1997 represented a backwards step in relation to UNCED's outcomes.

The New York Summit consolidated the role of business and industry as privileged partners of the United Nations, establishing permanent contact and consultation on environmental issues. The regulatory situation relating to TNCs and business in general has worsened greatly in the past five years. Already in 1992, the US government successfully pressured for downsizing the UN Center on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC), which had been set up to monitor the social, economic and environmental impacts of corporate investment in developing countries.

Hence though various initiatives have taken place at the national and international levels the problem of environmental crisis is still yet to be solved.