

The Geopolitics of Environmental Degradation

The feeling of disappointment that followed the United Nations Rio Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED-92) is due to a lack of full understanding of the reasons that drive governments to reduce environmental degradation.

Until recently, 'development', or 'progress', was intimately associated with tidy streets, fresh supplies of clean water, and removal and disposal of solid wastes and liquid effluents. This is what has characterized 'good' small and medium-sized cities since Roman times. Yet around the Third World, a large fraction of the population lives among the rubble and residues that it produces, due to the lack of the resources which are needed to build sewers and the engineering works which are needed for the supply of water. This is quite evident in the slums of the big cities that, generally speaking, surround 'islands of prosperity' where the well-to-do people succeed in obtaining a quality of life which is comparable with that in Europe or the United States. Poverty is at once the main reason and source of local pollution.

Pollutional Categories

The elimination of *local* pollution has always been one of the main objectives of municipalities and state governments. It is only recently that two other areal categories of pollution have become important: these are *regional* pollution and *global* pollution.

Regional pollution is caused mainly by automobiles and heavy industry which are inherent in the more prosperous societies. Large cities such as Los Angeles, Mexico City, or São Paulo, have long been 'suffocating' under pollution caused by the emissions resulting from the burning of fossil fuels (mainly particulates, sulphuric acid, and nitrogen oxides [NO_x]), and collectively known as 'smog'. Sometimes the amount of pollution produced is large enough to cause regional and even transborder problems, such as the 'acid rain' originating ultimately in the United States but responsible for the destruction of life in Canadian lakes. The same has happened to lakes in Scandinavia, due to industrial activities on the other side of the Baltic Sea.

The third category of pollution is the *global*, and its most obvious consequences so far are the reduction of the stratospheric ozone layer or shield by chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and the warming of the globe (the 'greenhouse effect') caused by emissions of carbon dioxide and other 'greenhouse' gases. These problems result from changes in the composition of the atmosphere and have little to do with national borders. The causes of such *global* problems are gases originating anywhere in the world, and are such that, for example, the well-being of people living in Switzerland might ultimately be affected by what takes place in India or China (and *vice versa*). These problems are truly global and hence biospheric, and the main burden of eliminating them falls clearly on the rich countries, with their extravagant patterns of consumption and profligate ways of life.

Third World Contributions

The developing countries contribute, at this time, only modestly to the emissions of chlorofluorocarbons and 'greenhouse' gases; but as their aggregate population is growing, as well as their economy in many cases, their 'contributions' are bound to increase.

To eliminate or alleviate the consequences of global pollution emanating from the developed countries is, therefore, important — *inter alia* to help developing countries to develop and grow in such a way that they will not threaten the atmosphere and hence The Biosphere. Such help will not only help them but, reciprocally, will help the developed countries themselves. This is clearly a case in which the self-interest of all the parties is involved, and is what differentiates global pollution problems from regional and local ones. In the case of regional pollution, few countries are involved, and they ought to be able to sort out the problems among themselves. This was done for example between Germany and Poland, when the German Government decided to help Poland to pay for filters in their smoke-stacks which were sending pollutants across the border into Germany.

As far as local pollution is concerned, local governments can expect little help. The rich countries have been unusually callous about problems of local pollution, except for loans offered through the international banks such as The World Bank. However, as the loans are limited, the country receiving them has to make often agonizing choices between fighting pollution or using the loans for developmental purposes.

Some Progress in Reducing Global Pollution

The only area where modest progress is being made is in trying to reduce global pollution. Meanwhile more than one-hundred developing countries expected the Rio Conference to make money available, on concessional terms, to fight local (and perhaps also regional) pollution. In my view they miscalculated the real interest of the developed countries to help them in their plight.

Especially when global pollution is involved, awareness of the seriousness of the forthcoming problems is not very clear in many of the rich countries, which are facing more immediate problems such as economic recession and unemployment. This explains why the pledges of concessional funds to act on environment and development at Rio were so modest — \$4 thousand millions per year for 5 years whereas the goals of Agenda 21 were \$125 thousand millions per year!

The immense gap between such goals and the harsh realities indicates that, to be successful in actions leading to the elimination of environmental degradation, one will have to be very specific and objective,

pointing out areas where there is a convergence of interests between countries, and not merely making vague appeals based on general philosophical and/or philanthropic grounds.

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*Professor Goldemberg, University Professor in Brazil and a fellow-member of the Governing Council of the International Academy of the Environment, Geneva, Switzerland, was the Rector of the University of São Paulo, Minister of Education, and Interim Minister of the Environment of the Government of Brazil, in the period when the UNCED-92 Conference took place in Rio de Janeiro — involving *inter alia* the world's greatest-ever gathering of Heads of State and/or Government. — Ed.

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ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES: From Stockholm To Rio and Beyond

Edited by

Mohammad NAZIM & Nicholas POLUNIN

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Gro Harlem Brundtland

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