

From Stockholm to Rio

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Twenty years ago the first environmental conference was held in Stockholm. Just some of its achievements include the adoption of the first global action plan for the environment and the creation of the UN Environment Programme as an international instrument to build environmental awareness and stewardship. Above all it placed environmental issues on the world's agenda.

The ideas in this book may seem to be remote from what we have come to know as the environment issue. This is due largely to the fact that the commentary to which we are most often exposed is via the media and influenced by people who push the environment as an important issue, but who often have a specific interest to promote; and these interests usually relate to rainforests, disappearing species and pollution.

What happened in Rio last June was not their event. The United Nations Conference for the Environment and Development concerned all nations who had priorities other than this narrow definition of environment. To put these priorities and the Rio conference into perspective, we need to turn back the pages to the last global environmental conference which took place twenty years ago. How did events which occurred there

and those which have happened since help to shape the 1992 conference?

The United Nations Conference on Human Environment was held in Stockholm in June 1972. In many respects, it was a dialogue of the deaf between the rich and the poor. The rich world, particularly the USA, had to face up to the effluence of affluence. In those days, the rivers foamed with pollutants, we had shipwrecked tankers like the Torrey Canyon, and weeks of winter smog over our cities.

In order to clean up the world in which we were living, governments of the industrialised and wealthy world wanted all nations and industries to agree to act together. If only one or two began serious clean-up operations, those few would be at a disadvantage because their industry would have to carry an additional and unfair cost. So it was in the interest of both industry and government to go to Stockholm to create a level playing field where all would agree to clean up.

The poor Third World did not see Stockholm in that way. They wanted industry, even with its inherent pollution problems. For them the problem was, and still is, poverty. In order to tackle poverty, they were prepared to adopt western ways and accept the environmental problems

as part of the package. Few in the northern sector of the globe took much notice of the problems of the south. It was in response to this indifference that Indhira Ghandi said: "Of all the pollutants we face, the worst is poverty. We want more development." She nor any other of the Third World countries got what they wanted.

Stockholm achieved success by making its mark. The western world began to see the error of its ways. Pushed by active pressure groups, much was done to improve matters.

There now exists a veritable library of rules and regulations to cover most western environmental ills. Rules that govern the air we breathe, the water we drink, the habitat in which we live, the food we eat. Not a perfect system, but it would be a cynic indeed who said that advances had not been made in environmental issues since 1972.

However, what has changed dramatically over the last twenty years is the number of things which we now do that have an impact on the environment and the increasing rate at which that impact registers. In particular, what we push into the atmosphere by driving cars, destroying forests and burning coal. In the early 1970s around 5.5 billion metric tons per head of carbon dioxide was released into the atmosphere. Today that figure has increased to 7 billion and so too has our awareness that it causes climate change. Our knowledge of its global effect has increased. Now it is not only our own resources that are affected but those of others and the effect is registered on a global scale. The oceans are suffering and land belonging to nations who do not cause the pollution suffers too. The damage has been magnified and has been shown to cause the destruction of forests and contribute to the disappearance of species, as well as have effects on climate change. The industrial countries came to Rio to solve the issues of climate, forests and endangered species.

The South did not come to Rio for the same reasons. They still face appalling problems related to poverty. In 1892 the average Indian had an income approximately half that of the average European. By the 1940s the gap had grown to 40 to 1. It now stands at 70 to 1.

In the twenty years since the last environmental conference, the food output per head in Africa has declined and the number of people living below the poverty line has grown by over one billion. The major cause of childhood death is foul water.

At Rio the poor nations insisted that the agenda should include development as well as environment. This time they had a bargaining tool. If, in the interests of halting climate change, the North wanted the South to halt deforestation, to slow down the consumption of coal and oil, to reduce birthrates, then the North would have to pay.

Time and time again over the last twenty years, the poorer nations have argued that the price they receive for their goods in the market place is too low; that their debts are intolerable. If all the aid given by the North is subtracted from all the interest that is paid on the debt by the South, they end up paying us more than we give them. Trade and debt have always been, and still are, the issues.

Unless these problems are addressed, the South does not see how problems such as the destruction of the environment and the growing birthrate, so closely linked to poverty, can be tackled.

Issues such as corruption, bad management and dictatorship contribute to the problems; it could be argued that the Third World is its own worst enemy. But many there would argue that the Northern management of trade and debt issues are the fundamental causes of their ills.

The Earth Summit in Rio was inspired and guided by a remarkable document published in 1982 by the Brundtland Commission which tried to balance the arguments concerning North/South responsibility and suggest ways forward. Intended as a progress report on achievements since the Stockholm conference ten years earlier, the impetus for the Brundtland report came from progressive nations and organisations. Many of them had been involved in the Stockholm conference and were concerned that the agreements and goals of the 1972 event were not being achieved. These governments, with some notable exceptions including the USA and the UK, set up an independent commission with a brief to investigate the links, or the lack of them, between environmental destruction and development worldwide.

An unusual departure from similar commissions in the past was the diverse and respected group appointed to report to the commission. An American industrialist, a European prime minister, a radical Third World feminist and the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth formed just part of the influential and knowledgeable group who were given the brief.

To the informed minority the findings of the commission were not surprising. They concluded that if we continue to use up natural resources as we do at present, if we ignore the plight of the poor, if we continue to pollute and waste, then we can expect a decline in the quality of life.

To describe the way of halting this decline the commission coined the term sustainable development. This is best described as economic progress which meets all of our needs without leaving future generations with fewer resources than those we enjoy. A way of living from nature's income rather than its capital account.

Sustainable development is not easy to achieve. It demands changes in lifestyle, particularly for the more wealthy nations who continue to draw on nature's capital, and it requires much more attention to the destructive and wasteful effects of poverty.

For wealthy nations, sustainable development means policies concerning issues such as recycling, energy efficiency, conservation, rehabilitation of damaged landscapes. For the poor nations it means policies for equity, fairness, respect of the law, redistribution of wealth and wealth creation.

Worthy thoughts concerned with worthy deeds which for once did not fall on stony ground. Two important factors helped bring the report in to the public domain. Firstly, Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland, the chair of the

commission, became the Prime Minister of Norway shortly after working on the report in 1987. She was thus in a position to promote the conclusions of the report at the highest possible level. And this she did. Ironically, she was joined by Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the UK prime minister who had originally opposed the commission. But, as a scientist, Mrs Thatcher had become deeply concerned about the discovery of the hole in the ozone layer. As a result she decided to promote the environment issue at the United Nations and was joined by Gorbachev, Mitterand and Gandhi.

Thus, the environmental beauty contest of world leaders was set in motion. By the end of 1988, some 50 national leaders had come out in strong support of the conclusions of the commission, with many calling for a major event to discuss and act upon the Brundtland report.

The resulting debate in the UN in 1989 saw resolution 44/228 passed. This stated that there should be a UN Conference on Environment and Development and determined the ground which the conference should cover. The mechanics of the United Nations demand that such a resolution be passed by a consensus process, a long and complex methodology in which all governments have input allowing them the means to introduce issues of particular importance and relevance to their own countries. This process might not be the most effective way of doing business, but contrary to popular belief, it does not always result in the lowest common denominator. Some of those involved fight hard for their ideas and wear down their opponents.

Eventually, perceptions moved closer and the resolution was passed but the gap between the rich and poor nations was still very wide. For example, the USA wanted very little control to be exercised over multinational companies, many of which are North American; but the poor nations wanted a greater degree of control as they believe that the companies of the west exploit their resources. Many other issues were influenced by major differences between rich and poor and the resulting resolution which established the format for Rio was extremely wide. Given the complexity of UNCED and the weeks of preparation that went into it; it is commendable that 38 chapters of Agenda 21 were agreed, along with two conventions, a set of guidelines and a Rio declaration.

In retrospect, there are two observations that stand out as to what happened in Rio. Firstly, this was not a conference about the environment at all, it concerned the world's economy and how the environment affects it. This in itself is a mammoth step forward as politicians come to understand that the issues do not just concern plants and animals, but life itself. Secondly, this was the first meeting of world leaders since the end of the Cold War. The old East/West agenda is dead, attention is now focused on North and South. Rio not only marked the beginning of a new era but a triumph for that small band of campaigners who set out at Stockholm. Twenty years on their issues of environment and development have taken centre stage in a new age.