

World Commission on Environment & Development:* Views from Europe

The linkages between the starving Ethiopian child who symbolizes environmental disaster in Africa, and the world's existing pattern of economic relations—including the agricultural support policies of the richer countries, and the international debt problem—were heavily underscored in the discussions of the World Commission on Environment and Development at its Third Meeting which was held in Oslo at the invitation of the Government of Norway.

In the Third World, the Commission had affirmed its view that poverty is a dominant influence in the complex of linkages between issues which affect the environment. It was imperative to sustain the environment, so that economic development itself might be sustained, the Commissioners view being that *a sustainable environment is both the objective and the means of development.*

Various Situations: (a) Energy and Pollution

The Commission discussed energy, as well as industry and food security, in relation to environment and development. Policy options in acid rain and carbon dioxide and their relationships to climate were considered. It was recognized that recent work points to the progressive acidification of soils and the eventual exhaustion of their buffering capacity in some areas. If people want electricity, then prevention of acidification must be regarded as an integral part of electrical generation which must be paid for by inclusion in the price of the kilowatts consumed. Paying that price can be delayed but never avoided. It was further recognized that acidification is not just a problem of industrialized countries but has also been at work in many parts of the Third World and is now showing its effects there.

It was recognized that the transport of hazardous waste materials across national boundaries—from where it was originally created to some other place of permanent disposal—had become an urgent issue. The problem was essentially manageable as long as the costs of disposal were faced.

(b) Food Security and Population

The Commission debated the need for a new international framework for food security, noting that there is in fact, globally speaking, more than enough food for all. An evident need was for global, regional, and national, policies to ensure equitable distribution and improved consumption by the rural and urban poor. Also noted was the fact that the gap between actual and potential agricultural yields at currently available levels of technology varied around the world from very slight to 80% increases. Such variability existed even within some large countries. This was clearly a situation which could respond to active management, given the political will and sufficient enlightenment.

The Commission addressed the population perspective with contributions from Chen Chandu from China, Rolando Garcia from Mexico, and Lester Brown from the United States. Policy options were discussed, and it was agreed that the issue would have to be returned to at a later meeting. What was clear, however, was a consensus that no

country could, in present conditions, continue without *some kind of active population policy.*

The Commission addressed the question of international economic relations and several Commissioners stressed that the need to focus on the relationship between environment and development might provide a springboard for originality in this difficult area.

(c) Other Topics

After receiving statements from a wide variety of United Nations and other agencies, the Commissioners heard submissions from various bodies ranging from para-statal institutions to citizen action groups. Some of the issues dealt with were marine resources, acidification, the 'greenhouse effect' in the Earth's atmosphere, and the African crisis. Nuclear waste disposal and nuclear fuel reprocessing came under strong attack from Greenpeace and others, and the pertinent philosophy of Nordic governments and of Finland was expounded. The Commission registered a clear impression that waste disposal is a major element in public anxiety about the future of nuclear power, and that it is a problem to which solutions exist only 'in principle'.

Several academic institutions presented papers, among them a combined effort by Nordic institutions on acid rain. Another joint paper, submitted by a consortium of Nordic Nature protection associations, incorporated the view of a group promoting ideas for a 'new international economic order'—advocating, *inter alia*, that all governments should acquire a 'foreign policy for the environment'. The International Chamber of Commerce made a submission expressing industry's views on several environmental problems.

In a further joint paper, the Nordic Council of Ministers reviewed the world environmental *problématique*, remarking that 'in a number of areas, free market mechanisms will not promote the desired long-term management of natural resources'. They also discussed the integration of environmental considerations into Nordic development assistance.

(d) International 'Environmental Bank' Suggested

This was proposed by the Norwegian Liberal Party—to be established by the UN and financed to the extent of one thousand million US dollars—to give cheap loans for investment in environmental efforts in member countries. It would be organized in regional branches.

Submissions from the Nordic Red Cross national societies and from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) dealt with similar and related areas, highlighting their recent work in Africa and noting the continued poor support for rainfed agriculture in that continent.

The World Commission for Environment and Development's final report is to be submitted to the UN General Assembly in 1987, and that same year will be declared European Year of the Environment by the European Economic Community (EEC). Meanwhile, the next meeting of the World Commission on Environment and Development was held throughout the week beginning October 28 in São Paulo, Brazil, at the invitation of the State government.

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* Concerning the establishment and objectives of WCED, see our note on pages 78–9 of this Volume. Subsequently its Chairman, Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former Minister of Environment and then Prime Minister of Norway, contributed a pungent piece on 'Employment and Development' to the second instalment of our Multi-editorial in the next issue (published on pages 99–103 of the Summer one).—Ed.