Communication to
The Environmentalist

UNEP's view — environment and development

In the four thousand and five hundred million years of the history of this planet, the survival has never depended so much on such a fragile ecosystem. In spite of the explosion of knowledge around us, the new growth of communication facilities, a growing rapport between the users and the conservationists and between the scientists and the governments, the process of environmental decay continues.

In twenty years from now the world will be more crowded, the ecosystem more brittle and unstable, and there will be further environmental degradation. The projected 6.35 billion people by the year 2,000, a more than fifty per cent increase over 1975 i.e. in a mere 25 years, are going to put more strain on the environment and the global ecosystem. The pressure of people alone can reduce the forest covers by 40 per cent in the next twenty years in the LDCs alone, whereas the arable land may increase by only 4 per cent.

The history of industrial revolution in the West can be regarded as the beginning of a process—a process of consumption and overuse of mankind’s resources without regard for the consequences. In the nineteenth century the average product growth in today’s developed and industrial West was two to three per cent against an average population growth of one to two per cent. The post fifties saw a major change in the development pattern in the world; between 1960 and 1970 population growth in the industrial countries remained around one per cent but in the developing countries the growth rate was 2.5 per cent. On the other hand, in the early seventies, before the energy crunch hit the world, out of nearly 3.6 trillion dollars worth of world production, more than sixty per cent in real terms was consumed by the developed world.

If 1973 can be taken as the watershed year when the world started seriously to consider the energy alternatives and looked with horror at its total dependence on fossil fuel, the last half decade saw a number of new and revolutionary concepts gaining support regarding the relationship between environment and development. Within the period of the last eight years, an infinitesimally small span compared to the history of the planet, the integrated nature of the relationship between development and environment is more clearly understood. It is also clear today that development without destruction is possible. Never before was it understood so clearly that to have a better quality of life and to achieve a diversified and balanced material prosperity, it is essential to strike a balance between man and his ecosystem and between resources and their use.

The Stockholm Conference was definitely more than a symbolic effort of mankind to come to a general agreement on creating environment consciousness among people and, where possible, prevent the decay. The fast rising consumption curve in the North and the slowly rising curve of economic prosperity in the South should be causes of equal concern. In the North the economic surplus and overuse of resources have generated a lifestyle which is undermining the very foundation of the system. For instance, 30 years ago the
developed countries of the North were the main suppliers of food. They have lost that status, barring United States and Canada from where 75 per cent of the world’s food supply comes. In the next 20 years USA may lose 20 per cent of her food producing potential of the currently cultivated 400 million acres of land due to soil erosion, at a time when its own population could reach 300 million.

In the developing countries, environmental degradation is the major cause of their negative economic growth. Over grazing, floods, problems of alkalinity, salinisation, demand for poor man’s fuel—firewood—and pressure of people are accelerating the process of desertification at such a rate that almost six million hectares of arable land is being lost every year; the area of agricultural land with deteriorating productivity is larger.

On top, significant losses of world forests are visualised as the demand for firewood increases. Forest covers deteriorating at the rate of 5–10 million hectares a year, mostly in tropical rainforest areas, it is estimated that between forty per cent and half the world’s forest covers will be gone by the year 2000. “Polluted seas, rivers, increasing carbon dioxide deposits in the atmosphere, agricultural runoffs, hazardous waste dumps, acid rain, toxic chemicals and gradual depletion of zone layers are daily threatening the environment.”

The threat to mankind from modification and gradual alteration of the environment led the search for a balance between development and ecostability which in turn opened up new areas or research, so long beyond man’s concept and was behind the new outlook “development without destruction”.

Deterioration of agricultural land, deforestation and greenhouse effect of CO₂ deposits are one aspect of the onslaughts on environment. The other comes from the increasing deposition of heavy metals and toxic chemicals in the world’s river, canal and ocean system. Although metals have many physical properties in common, their chemical activity is quite diverse, and their toxic effects on biological systems is even more diverse. The few environmentally important metals are copper, cadmium, tin, lead, vanadium, chromium, molybdenum, manganese, cobalt and nickel. Besides there are metalloids like antimony, arsenic and selenium.

No less important is the devastating effect of wars on environment, economy, and the social and ecosystems of nations. In the last thirty five years, since the end of the second world war more than 131 regional and local wars took place involving 83 countries, mostly in the Third World, and the world reached the threshold of nuclear wars at least 16 times between Điện Biên Phu and the Cuban missile crisis. Global military spending has increased thirty times since 1900 and now absorbs well over $500 billion a year—nearly $1 million per minute. Third World military expenses in real terms increased four-fold in the last twenty years and, with the present trend continuing, the total military spending could reach the $1,000 billion mark by the year 2,000.

From its start, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has devoted itself, both as a catalyst and as an advisory body, to the basic problems and reasons of environmental decay and hazards, tried to find out a harmonious co-existence between the industry and environment and encourage development without environmental damage. This it has done by selecting topics and burning issues which are either environment-related or products of thoughtless misuse of the environment around us. Since man’s every activity alters the environment to some extent and that alteration in turn alters the ecosystem in which man and mammals live, relation of man to environment has always been the main concern of UNEP. Some of the topics it has flagged vigorously were environment and cancer, children and environment, schistosomiasis (Bilharzia) or snail fever, pesticides in the food chains, water and water-borne diseases. It also focussed attention on chemicals and environment, malaria, use of agroindustrial residue and the development of alternate and renewable energy sources, transportation and impact of tourism and noise pollution.

Some of the significant UNEP activities relate to the alternative patterns of development and lifestyles, cost-benefit analysis of environment protection measures, guidelines for the choice of technologies and siting of specific industries, and the assessment of environmental impacts of development activities.

All these need a greater degree of public awareness and understanding of the issues, trained manpower to cope with the identification, analysis and solutions of the problems, and adequate resources to achieve these ends.

A global environmental ethic has been advocated to guide patterns of human behaviour towards the protection and preservation of the quality of the environment. The evolution of such an ethic through environmental education is expected to produce a world popula-