ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Developing Countries in the Environmental Crisis

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It is not only the economic gap between “North” and “South” which has dramatically widened: the same is true of the ecological gap. However, because the Earth is one ecological unit, the progressively worsening environmental crisis in the developing countries is of significance for the whole world.

Following the first environmental conference in Stockholm (1972) public opinion has become increasingly sensitive to environmental questions and the population’s awareness has increased – this is true not only in the North but also in the South. Since that time, the awareness of the problem has been institutionalised in many countries, and environmental problems are being “dealt with”. Thus, while there were only 10 countries in 1972 with an environmental administration, organised in one way or another (i.e. ministries, councils, commissions or other establishments), the figure has risen in the meantime to about 120, of which 80 are developing countries. The concept of “eco-development” as a strategic approach to harmonising development and environmental (protection) goals, has by now managed to find broad acceptance. However, the worldwide economic crisis which set in very soon after the Stockholm conference has greatly complicated the situation.

Whilst experience has meanwhile shown that economic stagnation or slow growth are in and of themselves no cure for the destruction of the environment (as was postulated at the beginning of the 1970s), the conflict between (short-term) economic interests and (long-term) ecological necessity, in both North and South, has not eased at all, but has in fact worsened. Environmental movements at the local, regional and national levels may have increased numerically, but their influence has increased rather less. Moreover, they are confronted with powerful economic sectional interests with one primary argument which they raise time and again, namely the loss of international competitiveness. Conversely, even against the background of a universal increase in unemployment the job potential in active environmental protection has so far at best received only partial recognition, in a small number of countries, a small number of economic sectors and a small number of environmental spheres.

One commendable exception to the above would appear to be the energy conservation policy which came in the wake of the first oil price shock in 1973 and has brought along with it an easing of the burden on the environment (both the consumption of resources and the emission of pollutants have been reduced). However, this process of energy conservation has not been evenly distributed, whether on a national basis (a problem generally appreciated) or on an international one.

Consequences of the Oil Price Rises

Those hardest hit by the oil price rises of the 1970s have been the oil-importing developing countries, hence the classification of a group of them as the MSACs (most seriously affected countries). All countries differ in the manner and speed with which they have adjusted their energy supply to suit the crucial changes in relative prices within the economy. What they all have in common, though, is the burden on their balance of payments, the worsening of the debt problem, and the threat, in some cases far-reaching, to local ecosystems as a result of the substitution of domestic energy sources for oil and oil products.

There are thus two senses in which the new situation brought negative environmental effects to the oil-importing developing countries: for one, the “second energy crisis amongst the poor” had a devastating effect on forest reserves (primarily through the use of firewood instead of kerosene) and thus on soil fertility and food production; secondly, because of the insufficient adjustment of import structures, the developing balance of payments crisis led to exportable natural resources being overused or more rapidly depleted as part of a bid to stabilise the balance of trade. As a result, the current situation is grim and the prospects for the future offer little encouragement: the

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Economic and ecological crises are mutually reinforcing in the developing countries.

If this vicious circle for the developing countries is to be turned into a virtuous circle, the moves necessary include counteracting the prevailing methods of resource utilisation and bringing to a halt the ecological processes of deforestation, soil erosion, desert expansion, climatic change etc. which result from inappropriate industrial and agricultural techniques and from the struggle to raise short-term productivity. Alternative patterns of development which can guarantee ecological endurance and are less costly in social terms are both known to exist and technically possible, even if they are not, or not as yet, realisable in all instances. Whatever problems may exist, however, there is one false conclusion which must at all costs be avoided when any assessment is made of the existing environmental crisis in the developing countries: that the way out of the current crisis can possibly disregard the natural environment. The general strategic discussion could be summed up as follows: the potential must be determined for ecologically sustainable, socially desirable and economically productive ways of using resources and these must be given concrete support in practice.

Common Interests

The Second Report of the Brandt Commission identifies the urgent need to arrest the further deterioration in the quality of the environment as one of the "common interests" between North and South. The Report's comments on this include the following: "Growing pressure on land, increasing use of chemicals, desertification and deforestation are reducing the productivity of soils in many parts of the world. The removal of forest cover, incautious use of chemicals and fertilisers, and soil erosion are destroying the soils and agricultural potential of scarce land resources and causing severe environmental damage... We emphasise the need for resources to halt and reverse these processes of ecological degradation, which now assume emergency proportions." 1

Other reports, too, which have appeared relatively recently 2 show that awareness of the interdependence between ecology and economy has increased. They have helped to clarify the two aspects of this interdependence: there are certain areas where, on the one hand, all concerned could derive advantages from international cooperation ("positive sum games"); on the other, all would have to suffer disadvantages ("negative sum games") if improved cooperation should fail to be established. A number of these problem areas will be examined below.

One observation can be made at the outset: the types of environmental problem discussed here occur, at least primarily, in the South, and many people in the North regard (or regarded) them as no more than "distant problems of the South". Conversely, many in the South feel that the problems have been brought about by the North (and transferred via technologies, institutions and interests). As yet, the awareness that these might in fact represent common problems for which commonly acceptable solutions have to be found has not been especially strong, but it does exist, and is finding increasing expression: the ecological question is becoming, or will become, part and parcel of the "North-South dialogue".

Decline in the Diversity of Species

Approximately 25,000 species of plants and over 1,000 of animals can now be classed as under threat of extinction; during the current or the next decade, one in ten of all terrestrial species could die out. The extinction of species on this scale is unprecedented in the history of mankind.

About two-thirds of all terrestrial species, including the majority of endangered species, are to be found in the developing countries; the tropical rain forests alone are the habitat for about 40 % of all species.

2 See, for example OECD (publ.). Economic and Ecological Interdependence, Paris 1982.