11 Social and Environmental Development

Under Article 55 of the Charter the United Nations is required to ‘promote higher standards of living, full employment and conditions of economic and social progress and development’. What this has meant in reality is that historically the United Nations has spent a great deal of its time and energy devising, launching and subsequently maintaining programmes whose economic and social content is designed to assist the countries of the developing world where a majority of the world’s population is to be found, often living in conditions of great poverty, hunger, disease or ignorance. Both during and after the Cold War the world has remained divided into rich and poor, advanced and developing or North and South, and the fact of this division colours most aspects of international affairs and is a dominant consideration in the way the United Nations works. The General Assembly may pass resolutions or proclaim a Development Decade but the success of these programmes which are designed to assist the LDCs or the Third World at large must depend upon the willingness of the advanced economies of the North to provide the means to implement them properly as opposed merely to supporting them with lip-service.

Political cynics in the advanced economies may ask what is the point in proclaiming a Development Decade: after all, everyone wants development and proclaiming such a decade is not of itself going to make anything happen which was not going to occur anyway. Similarly, the discussions which led to the Declaration and Programme of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) by the General Assembly in 1974 might set out the principles of economic behaviour that would be most desirable in an equitable world but they were unlikely, remotely, to bring these about. The voting on this issue – 120 for and 16 either against or abstaining – made absolutely plain the fact that the advanced economies had no intention of being told that they should make sacrifices on behalf of the majority. Nor, of course, was there any mechanism to make them do so. The Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States which the General Assembly adopted in 1974 in furtherance of the NIEO idea stipulated that every state has the right freely to exercise full permanent sovereignty over its wealth and natural resources within its national jurisdiction. This stipulation may have been conceived primarily on behalf of the developing countries which so easily find themselves subjected to exploitation by the transnational corporations
from the North yet the stipulation was a double-edged sword. It also meant that the advanced economies have the right to exercise absolute control over their own resources as they see fit and not necessarily in compliance with any principles advanced under such concepts as a NIEO.

If we examine the social and environmental activities of the United Nations over the years, all such activities being related, more or less, to development, we should do so in the light of the following questions: How much do such initiatives achieve? How much, once launched or proclaimed, are they ignored or allowed to become dead letters? How much do they emphasize, with potentially divisive results, the gaps in both wealth and poverty and, still more, in objectives between North and South?

The proclamation of Development Decades – in 1960, 1970, 1980 and 1990 – was a device to focus attention upon the development needs of the Third World while, under the umbrella of these decades, more precise initiatives were undertaken. In 1969, for example, the General Assembly adopted a Declaration on Social Progress and Development which, in its turn, led on to the adoption in 1970 of an International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade (1971–80) which, again in its turn, was followed by the adoption in 1974 (admittedly in circumstances which were greatly assisted by the rise of OPEC power in 1973) of a New International Economic Order or NIEO. At the end of the 1970s, in deteriorating economic conditions, the General Assembly called for global negotiations on international economic cooperation for development and though these negotiations achieved nothing the General Assembly, nonetheless, adopted an International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade (1981–90). It is possible to admire the determination of the General Assembly in passing such resolutions in the face of indifference from the advanced economies; otherwise, it might be asked, what is the point?

The 1980s was a gloomy decade for development. After the excitements of 1973 and 1974 the West did agree to a series of talks or dialogue in Paris during late 1975 but the Conference on International Economic Cooperation and Development (CIEC) which was attended by 19 representatives of the Third World and eight representatives of the capitalist West produced nothing concrete – only the idea of a continuing North–South dialogue – and though at first consideration the initiation of a dialogue may have appeared to represent an advance for the Third World, in retrospect its principal achievement was to emphasize the divide between North and South. During these Paris talks the skilful diplomacy of the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, first diffused demands for a NIEO and then deferred any decisions