



## Overview of the Committee

The first United Nations Environment Conference was held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972. At this groundbreaking meeting UN representatives formally recognized the need for a global effort to protect the environment from destruction by the encroachment of human civilization. They drafted a proposal recommending interdisciplinary intervention by the UN on environmental issues. It is this meeting in Stockholm that led to the establishment of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the administrative body that would be responsible for overseeing this effort. The UNEP mission statement is “to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations.”

Throughout the seventies and eighties the UNEP honored their commitment to environmental preservation. Notably, UNEP efforts led to the signing of the Treaty on the Protection of the Ozone Layer in September of 1987. This landmark treaty, known as the Montreal Protocol, was a direct result of the 1985 Vienna Convention on the Ozone Layer, sponsored by the UNEP.

The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro marked another important milestone for the UNEP. Unofficially dubbed the “Earth Summit,” this was the largest intergovernmental gathering in history. At this conference the UN member states adopted “Agenda 21,” a plan of action for sustainable development. This document recognized the environmental developments of the 1980s as “essentially negative,” and mandated that “sustainable development should become a priority item on the agenda of the environmental community.” Agenda 21 instigated a framework and protocol for evaluating specific topic areas, and implementing action plans. Among the 40 topics included in this report are changing consumption patterns, promoting sustainable human settlement development, protection of the atmosphere, combating deforestation, and conservation of biological diversity. This conference was a dramatic reaffirmation of the United Nations commitment to preserving the environment.

Major summits have been held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1997, and again in Malmö, Sweden, in 2000. On both occasions the UN has renewed its concern about environmental issues, and its support for the UNEP as the primary global environmental authority. The organization continues to push for tighter regulation from member states. Most recently in Malmö, the organization denounced the “alarming discrepancy between the commitments and action [of member nations],” and noted “special attention should be paid to unsustainable consumption patterns among the richer segments in all countries, particularly developed countries.”



The UNEP has been at the forefront of the global effort to protect our biosphere for nearly 30 years. The organization has been instrumental in such movements as protecting the ozone layer, curbing global warming, preventing over-fishing, and cleaning up pollution. And as the future is sure to bring increased environmental deterioration its role will become increasingly important in the new millennium.



## Topic 1: Biodiversity

Biodiversity is a term that until 10 or 15 years ago did not exist and yet today has become an important term in science and conservation. Biodiversity can be defined in many ways, it can for instance refer to a species richness that is present in a specific part of the world or it may refer to the total global genetic diversity. There are three major reasons that biodiversity has become such an important concept. First, during the 1970s and '80s the rate of deforestation in the tropical rainforests of the world was more accurately calculated, giving a startling view of the rate of diversity loss. Second, the direct and indirect value of diversity is beginning to be realized. And third, unlike other environmental problems such as global warming or water pollution, the effects of the loss of biodiversity are irreversible. Once a species is gone, it and all its genetic material can never be regained.

An important realization has been that biodiversity has value on purely economic levels. The new medicines and support to food crops of species level as well as genetic level diversity can be measured in terms of a bottom line. The improvements to human living conditions cannot be measured directly in dollars but can nonetheless be felt. This tangible value may be felt more immediately in the developed world and one of the major challenges for the future will be to reward the developing world for conserving its diversity. This is important because the greatest percentage of diversity lies within the developing world and without benefits that are evident to the people of these countries conservation will be difficult. Diversity is also important in less tangible ways. There are many services to humans that diversity provides. Filtering and cleaning water is an example. The oyster population of Chesapeake Bay is estimated to filter the entire volume of water in the bay in one year. Before human impact on the bay and the decline of the oyster population, filtering of the entire volume took only a week. If this species were to be lost what would the effect be on the fisheries of the Chesapeake Bay?

The greatest threat to biodiversity is habitat loss. This is largely an effect of human population growth and consumption (or over-consumption). As an example there are two factors driving deforestation in tropical rainforests: the demand for new land by local people and the demand for wood products in the developed world. Another important threat is pollution. Agricultural runoff, pesticides and fertilizers as well as industrial processes cause species loss. A new threat to diversity may be chemicals that mimic hormones and damage the reproductive success of affected species. Climate change is another threat to diversity. Changes in weather patterns, sea level and other effects of climate change will certainly reduce diversity.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro created the Convention on Biological Diversity, commonly known as the "Biodiversity Treaty." It provides that developing countries be rewarded with money and technology, for preserving habitats in which medicinally valuable species may be discovered. This treaty was deemed necessary because of the large amount of money made by drug companies from



compounds isolated from species in developing countries. The problem is that the areas where these drugs have been found are disappearing for fuel and farming. The developing countries having received nothing from the drug companies for resources that have been found and removed from their countries and have no incentive to preserve these areas. It would seem that everyone would benefit in the long run by saving these last areas of habitat. Why then did the United States refuse to sign the treaty? The answer is short-term gain. This example provides an important pattern in environmental politics. The historic and present day roles of the developing and developed countries need rethinking to find a mutually beneficial relationship that also benefits the environment.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has recommended four priorities in environmental policy for the United Nations in his millennium report presented to the General Assembly, April 14, 2000. First, major efforts should be made in public education on the threat to the environment and the impact of environmental degradation on the human species. Second is the fundamental repositioning of environmental issues in the policymaking process. Integration of environmental issues into economic policy in an effort to produce “green” accounting that reflects the true cost of production and consumption. Third, governments must enforce environmental regulations and create more environmentally friendly incentives for markets to respond to. The current practice of subsidizing environmentally harmful activities must be reexamined. Fourth is the need for a “Millennium Assessment of Global Ecosystems.” It will be impossible to devise effective environmental policy without sound scientific information to base it on.



## **Topic 2: Economic Globalization and the Environment**

### **Introduction**

This summary of issues of concern to the United Nations environmental program will explore topics of traditional interest to those interested in the relationship between the natural environment and development. However, it is also our aim to attempt to place the paradoxes of the environment and development in a larger context which takes account of the relationship between, and the inherent interdependence among, the physical and social worlds.

Until recently, the field of international development has been almost exclusively concerned with the physical obstacles confronting the developing world. These barriers are composed of issues such as population pressure, destruction of the biodiversity needed to maintain life, lack of arable, productive land, pollution of the air and the water used both for drinking and irrigation, lack of basic public health knowledge, etc. It has only been within the last 20 to 30 years that the UN and other development organizations have begun to consider factors, outside of the purely physical, which impact the environment within which development takes place. These newfound concerns are focused primarily within the social realm. They involve issues such as the relationship between the developed and the developing world, the distribution of power within the developing society itself, and the interests of various stakeholders in the development process with an understanding of how they can positively or negatively affect the process and its outcome. As the discussion moves on to briefly outline three specific issues considered key to achieving the UN's development goals, it must be remembered that larger issues such as these loom in the background, continually shaping the outlines of the debate and the actions that result. In addition, as will hopefully be evident from the discussion below, all aspects of development are interrelated. It is unwise, if not impossible, to consider a development task as merely the sum of its independent elements. With that in mind, the summary can now move forward to consider the three issues mentioned earlier. They are population, the production-consumption dynamic, and debt relief for the developing world.

### **Population**

Population pressure presents at least a two-dimensional challenge. As should be expected, the second dimension is heavily influenced by the first. First is the numbers game. Global population is increasing at a phenomenal rate, the great bulk of the increase occurring within the last 40 years. The world's population now stands at approximately a little over 6 billion people and is expected to reach double digits sometime within the next 50 years (overpopulation.org). The vast majority of the growth is expected to continue to be in the areas which can least afford it, namely Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. According to overpopulation.org, even at a modest growth rate of 2.5 births per woman, the population would still reach 28 billion. The only



areas experiencing replacement level or negative population growth are certain regions of Western Europe. Even these seemingly ideal circumstances present their own set of unique challenges, i.e. an increasingly smaller working age population unable to support an increasingly large elderly population. In the developing regions, population pressures result in all of the physical consequences referred to earlier. For example, according to the Ecofuture website, 50% of the world's wetlands, 90% of its old-growth forests, and 99% of available prairie land has been lost. Additionally, species extinction is occurring at 100 to 1000 times its natural rate.

The second intimately related dimension concerns the social consequences of exponential population growth. With an extremely limited supply of available, usable land, a large proportion of the population is forced to look towards the city to provide desperately needed economic opportunity. Once again, these circumstances provide their own set of unique challenges, challenges which the urban areas often find themselves unable to meet. There are the predictable health and social control difficulties that result from having a large mass of people confined in a relatively small space. In addition, there is the problem of the lack of basic infrastructure to deal with the provision of social and health services as well as the production, distribution, and delivery of the already limited food and goods supply.

Recognizing that it is difficult to influence the internal structure of a society overnight, the UN nevertheless encourages such changes through activities undertaken primarily by the United Nations Population Fund. Fund initiatives focus heavily on two themes: education and the empowerment of women. Education efforts stress the importance of family planning and contraceptive use. Recognition of the core role that women play within the household and the community has resulted in the renewed interest in their empowerment. However, these initiatives are not only concerned with improving the economic and social position as well as increasing the amount of power and independence available to the individual (although these aims are certainly worthy in and of themselves), they are also rooted in an understanding of the necessity of women's active participation if a development program is to have a positive, meaningful, and lasting impact.

## **Production-Consumption Dynamic**

After outlining a few of the concerns about population growth, the link to the production-consumption dynamic should be clear. Just to put things in perspective, imagine a society's "ecological footprint." This is defined as the sum of the natural resources a society appropriates from nature to support its human activities. An analysis of these footprints reveals that the combined population of the world's industrialized nations (some 20% of the total world population) uses almost all the available resources on the planet. If the entire population were to natural resources at a level equal to the standards of the North American population, it would take two additional planets to accommodate us. To continue to paint the picture all the more starkly, here are a few additional numbers (again from the Ecofuture website). Only 8% of the



world's population own a car while 87% of the American population own at least one. The average American teenager spends more pocket money in a year than an individual living in one of the world's poorest countries will earn in that same year. Finally, analysis of global agriculture provides an appropriate example of how changing consumption patterns have upset major biological systems. By some standards agricultural development has been successful. Over the past thirty years output has increased, and although the world population has grown dramatically, the nutritive needs of our planet are better met than they were a generation ago. This same time period has seen an evolution in eating patterns as well. Worldwide meat consumption has tripled since 1961. However, livestock requires a significant commitment of both monetary and physical resources (when compared to the production of grains, fruits, and vegetables which are likely to be of equal or greater nutritive value); resources, which might be better utilized in efficiently meeting the nutritional and economic, needs of those in poverty. Livestock raised in the developing world is exported primarily for consumption by, and profit of, those in the developed world. Those in the developing world rarely have the means required to enjoy the fruits of their investment and labor.

The production-consumption relationship bears striking similarity to the colonialism of the past, according to David Korten and Alan Durning among others. Resources are extracted, exported for processing and manufacture of the finished product and re-sold to the original producers at prices, which they cannot hope to afford. In addition, as an added benefit, besides earning hefty profits through procurement of cheap resources and labor, northern consumers have the luxury of relegating the unpleasant externalities of the industrial process to others. (For example, a nine-fold increase in the application of inorganic fertilizer over the past half-century has led to a disruption of the global nitrogen cycle. That same time period has seen 2/3 of all agricultural land degraded by erosion, salinization, compaction, nutrient depletion, biological degradation, or pollution.) In other words, they are out of sight and out of mind. The intricacies of this dynamic will be one of the major focuses of the UN commission on sustainable development for the next two years.

## **Debt Relief**

The preceding discussion of the production-consumption dynamic will hopefully provide a useful framework for discussion of an issue, which has received a lot of attention this year as a result of Jubilee 2000. The issue is debt relief for the developing world. The amount of cumulative debt owed to the developed world by the developing world is astronomical. Some estimates, which focus on the poorest of the poor, claim that it is in the range of \$110 billion. It is virtually a foregone conclusion that very little, if any, of the debt principal can or will ever be repaid. Those opposed to debt relief argue that releasing a country from its obligations sets a bad precedent and will ultimately lead to a cycle of dependency. Those in favor of relief counter with the argument that money spent on the part of the debt that is serviced (the Jubilee 2000 WebSite estimates that the continent of Africa repays \$200 million in debt service per week) can



and should be spent on designing and implementing effective strategies and programs which meet the needs of the citizens of developing countries, rather than on padding the already thick pockets of the capitalists of the developed world. For example, according to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, “Tanzania will be paying the west an annual average of £100m (approximately \$160 million) in 2001-3. That is still considerably more than the £59m (\$120 million) Tanzania spends annually on basic education.” It is an issue with which the UN is familiar but with which it must carefully deal due to the delicacy of its relations with member governments, the IMF, and the World Bank. Despite the need for caution, it is an issue which could not only help determine the success or failure of development efforts but the stability and effectiveness of political and social systems as well.

## Resources

[www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org)  
[www.y6b.org](http://www.y6b.org)  
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