

A Global Approach to Sustainable Development: International Conventions on Environmental Protection

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Considering the large scale utilisation of environmental resources to satisfy the unlimited wants of human beings, and the consequent emission of large quantities of waste matter into the environment, the need for sustainable development becomes evident to conserve the quality of the environment.

While several definitions of sustainable development exist, a concept that is discernible in all these definitions is the necessity for a holistic global approach for the achievement of sustainable development. Even if theoretical definitions are kept aside, and superficial or indepth meanings are taken, or if special or general meanings are considered, what is apparent and not debatable is that sustainable development cannot be considered and achieved in national, or regional terms but that it is a development that should be considered from a global perspective. In this regard, sustainable development is defined in the oft quoted Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development or the Bruntland Report, as development that "meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs" (WECD 1987, 46). Accordingly, sustainable development means a livelihood pattern that is universal and not time bound and one that is not confined to the time period of the present generation or another specified period of time.

The concept of sustainable development is connected to both the environment and development. It is a concept that combines the two ... concepts of environmental conservation and economic development (Maddubamandara, M.C. 1997 1). In brief, it is a socio-economic development that is brought about by a ... of the environment (Jayakody, S.K. 1996.334-344). It highlights the interdependence of economic development and the quality of the environment. Therefore, if efforts are not made to eliminate the inequalities that are prevalent throughout the world, the future of humankind becomes more and more uncertain. (Welfred, R. 1955, 7). Therefore the sustainable strategies that should be followed need to be for all times. They should be ... They should be...

The Bruntland Commission, which studied the long term and ...environmental strategies and economic development, shows that environmental protection and economic development will become complementary only if there is a radical transformation of the present economic system which perpetuates inequalities in the living standards of the people. The report further points out that the economic development which individual countries achieve by following different strategies and at different rates of acceleration is unproductive and that it should be achieved by all countries collectively (see Welfred, R. 1955 7).

Therefore, the process of achieving sustainable development is almost entirely linked with the global environmental system. No eco system can be separated to function in a manner to en-

sure that its quality is not jeopardised. It is a whole. It is a ... resource. Therefore, the most forcible argument for sustainable development is that the natural environment does not recognise national, regional and international boundaries determined by man. (Micksell, R. F. 1992:9; Hodge, I. 1995:109). This is true not only of natural environmental systems but also of some of the present day social as well as economic systems designed by man. It can be seen that these too are developing in manner to extend beyond national boundaries. In analyses relating to sustainable development, some scientists have even gone to the extent of showing the need to establish "... for a global economic authority and to show the complementarity of environmental systems extending beyond national boundaries and socio-economic systems. (Micksell, R.F. 1992. 16). Similarly, in the future, national boundaries may change in many ways. It is possible that a new world order will come to exist based on economic considerations, and instead of political boundaries 'new national boundaries' based on socio-economic and environmental considerations will emerge in the future. That is, there will be a collective effort to safeguard and conserve not only economic systems, but also human existence and common global environmental resources. It is not that the preliminary trends are not seen today.

At present, the concept and meaning of resources are undergoing changes. It has already gone out from the national level and taken on the concept of global resources. The complex and fragile nature of the global environmental system, the interdependence of its components, and the inability to separate these components and manage them nationally have all become clear. (see Hodge, I. 1995: 5.1). The upper atmosphere, the oceans and the biodiversity belong to all nations and should benefit all nations equally. Similarly, all nations have to bear the consequences of global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer and acid rain. Therefore, it is clear that policies, plans and strategies should be directed beyond national level to the international level. (Micksell, I. 1992 9). Global resources are not unlimited. Similarly, the natural ability of the environment to absorb waste is also limited. Already, this situation has adversely affected planet earth. Also, resource exploitation, and emission of waste, will increase in the next few decades along with the almost doubling of the global population and rising living standards. Therefore, such human issues as population growth can no longer be dealt with at a national, or regional level, but the world community must work together towards a single objective (Population Council 1992: 769-778).

The single most obstacle that has to be faced in moving towards such a goal is, as identified as a basic problem at the 1992 Rio Summit, is the difficulty that has been encountered in reaching a consensus for the basis that is required for international conventions relating to environmental protection. On the one hand, the developing countries are not prepared to accept the continuation of the present rate of exploitation of the environment by the North. Factors such as carbon dioxide emissions, depletion of the ozone layer of the upper atmosphere, extinction of rare species and vegetation, emission

of toxic substances, which the North is focusing on have very low priority among the South. The priorities of the latter are on more basic necessities such as unsatisfactory supply of drinking water, unsatisfactory health protection, and soil erosion (Michael, R. and (age, Collin 1994, 4-5). However, according to reports from the south, the effect of environmental changes such as global warming is more on the poor countries than on the developed countries (Institute for African Alternatives 1990; Agarwal A. and Narain, S, 1991).

Many developing countries are heavily indebted to either banks or states in the North or to international agencies. The opinion of the majority of the people of the south is that in protecting the environment or in developing it, the basic necessity is to focus on the needs of those in poverty situations and on national debt. (Latin American and Caribbean Communism on Development and Environment 1990).

A fundamental consideration in achieving sustainable development is to reach a consensus on such issues as were discussed earlier and to adopt a global approach through international conventions. It is not possible to achieve sustainable development on a national basis. If each nation acts on its own, for instance, it can dump the waste material it produces anywhere in the ocean. This will be a temporary solution to a national problem. However, will this be a solution when all the countries are taken as a whole? If each country acts on its own, the ocean will become a sink. This will be tantamount to depriving the nations of the marine resources which they are entitled to, as well as contributing to large scale marine pollution. Therefore, finding solutions to environmental problems nationally is not be effective or even feasible. Solutions can be found only at an international level through the implementation of international standards arrived at by understanding and consensus. Environmental problems should be looked only through an international perspective.

Several important practical measures have been adopted in recent years to achieve the objectives of sustainable development. These are the international efforts aimed at avoiding environmental damage caused in the process of economic development, and conserving and environment on a sustainable basis.

Even before the concept of 'sustainable development' gained currency, agencies concerned with environmental conservation emerged at the international level under the auspices of the United Nations. There are many instances in which agencies were formed at the state level and conferences at which numerous conventions were adopted to deal with environmental problems in a practical and concerted manner.

The first international agency to be established which had an understanding and focus on the need to address environmental problems at a

global level was the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The ICUN which was established in 1948 was renamed as the International Union for Nature and Nature Conservation in 1956. This organisations which comprised government and non-government agencies can be regarded as a cornerstone which was laid for global environmental conservation and the protection of the global community.

The World Wildlife Fund-WWF established in 1961 in Switzerland is an international environmental non-governmental organisation. Some of the other specialised agencies which have been established at the international level as described below.

The UNESCO Conference on the Living Planet was organised by UNESCO in Paris in 1968 to create an awareness on the environment and to sensitise the public on the need for the rational use of the planet's resources.

The most important result of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, which was a precursor to international environment conventions was the establishment of the United Nations Environmental Programme-UNEP. In later years, UNEP went on to provide a leadership role in global environmental matters.

At the beginning of the 1980s the Independent Commission on International Developmental Problems in its programme titled the North-South Programme for Survival recommended that more financial assistance should be provided to developing countries to undertake environmental programmes and that an Environmental Impact Assessment- EIA should be prepared when undertaking any development project.

This was a very important recommendation. In Sri Lanka, this recommendation has been included when enacting national legislation relating to the environment (National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980).

The publication of the World Conservation Strategy by ICUN can be considered as a basis for a practical approach to global sustainable development. Almost all the countries in the world, prepared national conservation strategies based on this document. Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to have prepared a national conservation strategy (Central Environmental Authority 1988).

The Rio Declaration on Global Warming and Conservation of Biodiversity

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) is popularly known as the Rio Summit or the Earth Summit. The Summit commenced on June 5, which was the World Environment Day and concluded on 14th June 1992. It was the largest conference attended by the highest number of world leaders.

As recommended by the World Commission on Environment and Development established in 1983, a global programme of work on environment and development was proposed under the title "Policy statement for the 21st century". This programme included two main conventions, which individual countries could not arrive at by taking unilateral decisions, and which needed the collective agreement of all nations.

One of these is the convention on climatic change. It makes all nations agree to a programme of work that will prevent the emission of carbon dioxide and methane to the atmosphere through human activities that will produce a greenhouse effect resulting in global warming.

The other is the convention on biodiversity. It states that all parties should agree to take necessary action to protect, and develop, endangered animal and vegetation species and thereby to preserve them and to prevent all activities that will endanger the biodiversity on earth.

By 1994, 60 countries had implemented the convention on climatic change. This resulted in the control of the amount of toxic gases including carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. For this purpose, the developed countries, which emit excessive amounts of gases to the atmosphere, should declare plans to reduce the amount of gas to the level emitted by them in 1990. At the same time all countries should maintain inventories regarding the emission of toxic gases.

The Rio Declaration includes in great detail the programme that these countries should adopt, both individually and collectively, to achieve these objectives. The manner in which the countries should agree to improve the environment is included under 27 principles.

Another important decision taken at this meeting was to provide financial resources to ensure that the conventions are followed in a meaningful and practical manner. The Rio Secretariat, proposed a green fund for this purpose. This was later renamed as the Global Environmental Fund. One of its main objectives is to provide financial assistance to developing countries to control green house gases and maintain bio diversity.

It was decided at the Summit to transfer the technology that would be required to implement these two conventions, especially in respect to the efficient use of energy, and to assess the environmental impact of the technology. While the developed countries were accused of producing dirty technology, it became clear that the global community including the developing countries would have to bear the environmental consequences of such technology and the financial cost of cleaning them.

The World Bank which focused attention on this aspect in its report of 1992 states that although environmental problems will occur inevitably in the process of economic development, environmental pollution has increased due to industrial development and energy consumption as a result of a development process which had not taken into account the cost to the environment. It further states, that in taking decisions regarding economic activities that would have an impact on the environment, the real challenge that is before man would be to take into consideration the cost to the environment. (World Bank 1992-7).

However, the practicability of implementing/enforcing conventions that were agreed upon is still debatable. Many countries provide energy subsidies as incentives for development. This invariably results in the emission of gases to the atmosphere. According to computations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-OECD, withdrawal of energy subsidies, would result in a 40% reduction in the emission of toxic gas by the year 2050. (Hodge, 1995:184).

It was to be vigilant about these aspects that a proposal was made at the Rio Summit to establish a Permanent UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

The Montreal Protocol on the Banning of the production of CFC gas to conserve the ozone layer (pl. get the correct title)

In the 1980s the world community came to realise that even more than the inability of our environmental resources to fulfill the increasing demands placed on it, was that the atmosphere was no longer able to absorb the waste and environmental pollutants that were being produced by human economic activity. In some respects, it was clear that the pollutants that had been emitted into the environment cannot be absorbed by the environment. (Hodge 1.1995:20).

In 1985, it was scientifically proved that a hole had been formed in the ozone layer as a consequence of the emission of chlorine containing compounds into the atmosphere over a long period of time. The hole in the ozone layer threatens the existence of human beings and animals as well as that of vegetation due to excessive amounts of ultra violet rays penetrating through the atmosphere. The world community recognised that there was an urgent need to stop the emission of gases that would damage the ozone layer.

The world community which met in Montreal in 1987 under the auspices of UNEP agreed on a protocol that would protect the ozone layer.

The Montreal Protocol, which was described by the Director of UNEP Mustapha K. Tolba as 'the first and true global agreement that was reached to protect each and every human being living on earth', was an important initiative of that decade. To tackle the problems caused by the depletion of the ozone layer, which affects all human beings equally, the conference that gathered with the objective of limiting the production and use of CFC and halone, decided that by the year 2000 there will be a complete stoppage of the production and use of these two substances.

However, a meeting held in Geneva later reviewed the situation. It was decided that the earlier agreed time limit should be brought forward to 1996 because the ozone layer could not absorb these substances any further. While it was agreed that the developed countries should stop the production and use of the gas with immediate effect, the developed countries agreed to provide financial and technical assistance to factories producing such gases in developing countries to change over to the production of ozone friendly gases.

The RAMSAR Convention on Wetland Conservation

The important role that the wetlands play as an environmental system in maintaining the global ecosystem became evident to the world community only after the large scale reclamation of wetlands to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population. It has been understood that wetlands are not wastelands and that they are essential for the maintenance of the eco system. However, unless steps are taken to conserve the wetlands, they will be easily destroyed or ru-

ined. Although individual nations have undertaken measures to conserve the wetlands in their own countries, the necessity of conserving such lands in accordance with international standards becomes imperative. The Ramsar convention came into existence to meet such a necessity.

The main objective of this conference held in 1971 in Ramsar, which is located on the Caspian coast and is important nationally as well as internationally because it is the habitat of migratory water birds, was to obtain international cooperation in wetland conservation. While Sri Lanka became a signatory to this convention only in 1990, out of 41 wetlands in the country it has included only the Bundala wetland in the Ramsar convention.

The principal aim of the Ramsar Bureau, which is managed by the ICUN is to conserve wetlands. Accordingly, the signatories to the convention are bound to fulfill the following tasks.

In planning the utilisation of national land resources, national governments should pay attention to the conservation and rational use of wetlands, should further develop conservation by establishing nature resources, should include in the convention those wetlands which are important internationally, and should submit to the bureau annual reports on wetland management.

This task has been assigned to the National Wetland Monitoring Committee functioning under the Department of... The signatories to the convention have established a fund for wetland conservation from which a small grant is provided for the conservation of Ramsar wetlands.

The Bali Declaration on Population and Sustainable Development

It is not inappropriate to state that the main obstacle to achieving sustainable development is the fact that the large majority of the world's population live in countries where the balance between environment resources and the population is declining. The theme of the 1998 World Population Day was "There are only a few days for the world population to reach six billion". When the Bali Declaration was issued in 1992, the world population stood at 5.67 billion with a population growing at an average annual rate of 1.7 per cent. The population growth rate of developed countries in that year was 0.5 per cent while in the developing countries it was 2.0 per cent. The world population is projected to reach 6.25 billion by the year 2050 only if the population programmes that are being implemented currently continue as anticipated. If not, the increase in the population would be much higher.

An ultimate objective of sustainable development is to achieve an equilibrium between human needs and wants, human resources and the environment as well as a higher quality of life. Therefore, there is an urgent need to achieve an equilibrium between population dynamics, socio-economic development, utilisation of natural resources and environmental quality. (Population Council 1992:770).

The 1992 Bali Declaration sought to sensitise the global community to a global sustainable development based on the fundamental principle of a stable population. The Declaration issued at the conclusion of the Fourth Asia Pacific Population Conference held in Bali, Indonesia from 19 to 27 August 1992 is known as the Bali Declaration. The Declaration of this conference, which was held under the auspices of ESCAP and UNFPA is detailed. It includes comprehensive information on population dynamics, population problems and state popula-

tion policies of a region in which half the world's population lives. (See Population Council 1992, 769-778 for the full report on the Bali Declaration).

All ESCAP and affiliated nations who endorse the Declaration are expected to prepare policies and action plans to achieve the objectives of sustainable development as well as set population targets. One of the targets included in the Declaration is the achievement of replacement level fertility by limiting fertility to 2.2 children per female and to achieve zero population growth by the year 2010 or earlier. Secondly, all member states should adopt measures to reduce the infant mortality rate from the 1992 rate of 90 per 1000 to 40 per 1000 by the target date. Thirdly, countries having a high maternal mortality rate agreed to reduce that rate by half by the year 2010. (Population Council 1992:770).

The population policy of Sri Lanka, which endorsed the Declaration is as follows: to achieve replacement level fertility by reducing the 1992 fertility rate of 2.7 to 2 by 2010 and thereby to reach a stable population level of 25 million by 2050.

Conclusion

Environmental conservation and economic development are two sides of sustainable development. Even though economic development is a human endeavour the environment is by nature a whole system. It is a composite unit which cannot be divided without harming its functioning. Therefore, it does not coincide with any artificial national boundary devised by human beings. Consequently, environmental conservation can be achieved only by discerning it as a whole. For this purpose the cooperation of the entire world is required. There should be a consensus among the world community not only about every aspect of the environment but also about development which is the other side of sustainable development. The anticipated results of international conventions is precisely this. This is the basis of global sustainable development. ■