Managing the Global Commons

Soedjatmoko.

SOEDJATMOKO*
Rector, United Nations University
Toho Seimei Building, 15-1 Shibuya 2-chrome
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150, Japan

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10 year after Stockholm – What's next?

I am most pleased and honoured at the opportunity to address this session of a Special Character of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Progamme (UNEP). We are met here to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment which brought UNEP into being and I am grateful to Dr Tolba for his gracious invitation to me to participate in this occasion. As one who was fortunate to attend that Conference as a delegate, I am doubly honoured to be here today.

The Stockholm Conference, at the time the largest United Nations conference ever convened, was a signal effort to focus the attention of the governments and the peoples of the world on the growing threat that the human endeavour, collectively and individually, posed to our planetary life-support systems and the finite supplies of air, earth and water on which they function.

The Conference came at a time when perceptions about the importance of environmental issues were already changing—more and more people were coming to realize that the state of our forests, lands and waters was not a diversion for a few ecology enthusiasts, but a deadly serious urgency for the whole world. Stockholm undoubtedly helped to accelerate that change. So too did a series of jarring environmental shocks that marked the early 1970s—in the drought-stricken Sahel, in the suddenly fished-out Peruvian waters, and, above all, in the ending of the era of cheap oil, an event with immense and far-reaching environmental consequences for the globe's forests and croplands.

As we look at the economic and political problems and difficulties we now face today, it is difficult to recall that it was Stockholm that made the concept of the environment a concrete and living reality at the local, national and international levels, and set in train many developments and action programmes and institutions, apart from UNEP, that have made environment a household word the world over. To this extent, then, much progress was made and continued to be made over the decade in man's relations to the environment.

Yet for all the environmental lessons which the past decade should have driven home, the realist is forced to conclude that few were. However much awareness and knowledge of environmental problems might have increased in the 10 years since Stockholm, it has not resulted in much effective or concerted action that even remotely match the magnitude of these problems. One hard question that must be asked then, in evaluating the impact (or lack of it) of Stockholm, as well as other major UN conferences, is: why have the action programmes adopted by these conferences not been as successful as they could have been, when measured against the goals that were set, and the resources that were made available?

*Mr Soedjatmoko became Rector of the United Nations University on 1st September 1980. He is a scholar of international development and politics, and has published numerous articles in journals and books on the social, economic, cultural and political aspects of development.

During the period 1968–71 he was Indonesian Ambassador to the USA and since 1971 has been Advisor for Social and Cultural Affairs to the National Development Planning Agency of Indonesia. From 1967–77 he was Personal Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia.

Mr Soedjatmoka was educated at the Medical College in Jakarta, Indonesia and Harvard University, USA. He has honorary degrees from numerous Universities including Yale University, USA. He is an International Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an Honorary Member of the Slam Society, Bangkok, Thailand, and a member of the Jakarta Academy, Indonesia. He is on the Boards of Trustees of the Aspen Institute and Ford Foundation, on the Advisory Board of the Institute for the Study of World Politics in New York, USA, and the Council of the International Foundation for Development Alternatives in Switzerland. In 1978 Mr Soedjatmoko was the recipient of the Ramson Mahsaysay Award for International Understanding (sometimes referred to as the Nobel Prize of Asia).

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The knowledge that was generated about the environment in the last 10 years has left major gaps—evidence of the degree to which we have become prisoners of our habitual academic inclination to approach something as immensely complicated as the environment primarily along single disciplinary lines. Such narrow approaches —however much they might deepen understanding of one particular area—will avail us little in trying to unravel the tightly-knit web of social, political, economic, technological forces and ecological balances, that are involved in most environmental issues.

The difficulties that hindered the effective implementation of plans of action at the national level have proven much greater than were expected. Among these, one may mention the inadequate data base and lack of analytical tools with which to clarify the different trade-offs, not only between the economic and environmental imperatives, but also to reconcile the differential impact of environmental intervention on different regions of the country, and on different segments of the population, or to work out the technological or other solutions which might turn such conflicting interests from zero-sum games to plus-sum games. The most crucial and difficult problem has turned out to be how to deal with the profound and complex linkages between environmental deterioration at the national and global levels and the persistent deep poverty in the poor countries of the world, thereby resulting in the failure of environmental policies that do not take into account the food and energy needs of the poor, and generally their economic and social interests. In addition where separate ministries or agencies for the environment were established, they have often proved to be incapable of dealing with the indifference, and hostility or of reconciling conflicting policies and bureaucratic interests, as well as equally powerful commercial and vested interests.

All these problems testify to the failure to identify adequately the critical management issues in the policies adopted and the failure to develop suitable management tools for the task. They also highlight the failure of the educational systems to develop the necessary manpower and the management expertise for the purpose. As a result, our collective capacity to monitor environmental change has proven incapable of keeping up with the rate of environmental deterioration in many areas. Especially many Third World countries can make only the crudest guesses about the extent of exploitation, depletion and deterioration of their natural resources. Without this capacity, their ability to develop sensible and appropriate resource- and environmental-management policies is sharply limited.

Neither have we been able to arrest environmental deterioration on a global scale. We all know the figures. Some 18 to 20 million hectares of the world's forests disappearing each year, six million hectares lost annually to desertification; another million or more paved over or otherwise lost every year to urban sprawl, thousands of species disappearing whose resistance to crop disease and blight might have been priceless future weapons against hunger. I need not take up this group's time with further elaboration of a picture of continuing global deterioration of earth, air and sea.

Another sort of deterioration is equally disturbing—in the recognition that sensible and sensitive management of the environment is an essential partner of development. Instead, we are witnessing once again the emergence of the view of the environment and development as rival players—the one as the guardian of virginal wilderness, the other as the champion of human advance.

Ironically and sadly, the view is gaining adherents not so much in the Third World (where it was once widespread) as it is in the First, in evidence among those policy-makers who hold that environmental concern and control are all well and good so long as they do not interfere with the progress of business and industry, and efforts to overcome the economic recession.

This point of view completely misses the recognition that production patterns which pay little heed to environmental degradation or resource depletion are ultimately doomed and in their dying may create enormous and irreversible ecological havoc. The desolate wastelands in various river basins in the world which once were the locations of great ancient civilizations, are mute testimony to this.

Thus environmental crises are not new. What is unique about the current one, however, is its rate and scale. What might in the past have been a deterioration over some centuries is now compressed into a few decades and it is happening everywhere on the planet. This stresses the particular folly in seeing environmental problems only in national terms. We cure one country's smog by building taller smokestacks only to find that the increased height helps to feed another country's acid rains.

In such cases, Erik Eckholm asks: Who speaks for the biosphere?

I fear the answer must be: Fewer today than at the time of Stockholm. For, most disturbingly in my view, what improvement there has been

in environmental awareness and support over the last 10 years has pretty much been confined to the national level—interest in international cooperation has actually declined. Yet in the waning of this interest, we could well be ignoring, and at our own peril, some of the most serious environmental concerns of this or any age—the irreversible damage that we could be wreaking on those regions of the earth's crust and atmosphere in whose protection and preservation all living creatures have a stake. These global commons—our climate, our tropical rain forests, our seas, our soils and other essential components of planetary life support—can only be efficiently monitored and managed on an international and on a regional basis.

The commons of the English country towns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suffered destruction from decisions by individual farmers to enlarge their herds with no heed to the consequences for the grazing needs of neighbouring farmers. The ultimate result was exhaustion of a common resource by overuse to the detriment of all users.

So too it could be with the global commons. If individual nations continue to overload the atmosphere with CO_2, over-fish the seas, or wrecklessly destroy tropical rain forests—with little heed to the larger international interests—it will only be a matter of time until these commons suffer irreversible damage.

This points up what I believe to be the most fundamental and important environmental challenge that must be met in the second decade after Stockholm: the development of improved ways of managing the global environment, i.e., the global commons. In many ways, the most important 'breakthrough' on the environmental front would be the creation of innovative and imaginative new management tools. In his 1980s tool kit, the national and international policy-planner needs no more notice of new committees or new agencies formed. He needs rather to know about ways to respond more flexibly, to adapt to the unexpected, to cope with the uncertain, and to break down bureaucratic rigidities.

The management strategies that are developed need particularly to recognize how intimately interlinked are environment problems and the problems of the poor. Much of the environmental degradation we are witnessing today—in soil erosion, deforestation, desertification, loss of genetic strains—is a result of the widening and desperate search by the poor for food and fuel. They simply have nowhere else to go but deeper into forests, higher up slopes, farther into grazing lands, pushing cultivation onto ever more fragile soils.

The future shape of the global environment will among others, also be determined by countless millions of decisions by poor individual farmers and villagers. Our ability to manage this environment will hinge on our capacity to cope with such decisions and incorporate them into our scientific and technological planning.

There are three particularly important dimensions to the development of appropriate environmental management policies at the global and regional levels.

The first should be the recognition that we need to prepare planners and decision-makers for the management of complex interactive systems. Environmental issues cannot be taken up one at a time—such attempts in the past have too often triggered other, often more stubborn problems. There is essentially no one single entry point into complex environmental issues; the approach therefore must be able to take many different aspects and levels of the problem into account simultaneously.

One thing that can stand in the way of the management of complexities at the national and international levels is single-issue politics—which can divert valuable human and material resources away from broader and more complicated issues. Whatever their other merits, we have to recognize that at times single-issue politics can be essentially a 'cop-out', an abdication of broader and more complex sets of interrelated responsibilities to humankind requiring responses at different levels and different degrees of sophistication. In each of our countries we will have to develop the political constituencies capable of doing so, as an essential element towards the enhancement of our environmental management capacity. The development of new forms of public education—of global learning—will have to be an important element of global environmental planning.

A second important consideration is the demonstrated incapacity to date of both governments and intergovernmental systems to cope with new conflicts of interests. The examples are legion.

In the field of communications, for example, there have been extreme difficulties and much inconclusive debate over the establishment of criteria for assigning priorities among legitimate but conflicting interests for the use of limited resources. In regard to satellite use, for example, who decides and on what basis the relative weight and importance to be assigned to the needs of meteorology? Of navigation? Of broadcasting? Of remote sensing? Obviously, we need management systems to cope with these kinds of

conflicting demands in ways that are equitable and most beneficial to society and to the end users.

A third management consideration should be of the international legal instruments that might be available to help regulate and enforce sounder environmental practice on a global basis. Ways need to be found to extend international law to cover a variety of human users of the biosphere. The effort to codify the law of the sea marks a valuable beginning, perhaps, but it is significant that it has really very little concern with some of the broader and more long-term environmental considerations of marine resource use.

Given the reluctance that so many governments have displayed to date in establishing legal measures to enforce environmental practices, it may be that we have no other choice but to start at the international level first in establishing standards and agreements—in anticipation that national governments would then eventually follow suit.

I say this in no degradation of the sovereign rights of nation-states. It is rather in recognition of the fact that there are certain pressing environmental problems that are too global in their implications and potentially capable of too disastrous an impingement on the lives of all humanity to be left untended.

In particular, therefore, we need to begin to design global and regional management mechanisms that can come to grips with problems such as those whose consequences threaten irreversible change and damage. By their very nature, these are the toughest and the most complex problems. But to put them aside—in favour of the more immediate or the more solvable—would only mean that they would still be there, grown larger, more cancerous, and less likely of solution, during the lives of our children. Surely this would be a shameful abdication of responsibility to future generations.

To be able to take up such responsibilities, however, and to cope with the complexities they imply, may mean that we need some sort of institutional response that goes far beyond the present international bodies that now exist. I think we need to ask ourselves, in all candor, whether our present intergovernmental bodies have proved sufficient to the task. But even if there is more focused cooperation among the United Nations and other international agencies than is now the case, perhaps we need in addition to think about kinds of institutions, and mechanisms that would represent not just the interests of governments, but also those of concerned publics along with the perspectives and values of scientists and other experts. Institutions, in other words, capable of representing and helping to manage the affairs of the many constituencies of the global commons.

Such institutions will need to encourage the kind of thinking that seeks neither the ideal or the possible solution—but rather the most desirable one. Insisting on the ideal can be a futile exercise, settling for the possible a timid one. However, finding desirable solutions to our environmental and resource needs will be a challenging task. This could require serious re-examination and rethinking where a country's sovereign rights regarding its own natural resources end, and responsibility and accountability for the transnational and global impact of the manner in which these resources are used, begins. Certain pollution abating policies and massive interventions in river-flows for irrigation purposes, with significant transnational and even global impact on climatological conditions or legitimate access to shared resources will force us to face up to these problems from a heightened awareness of human solidarity on the one hand but also from the recognition of the importance of the sovereign nation-state in the process of decolonization, development and of the establishment of a more viable and just international order. We have to do this also if we are to develop an overriding sense of responsibility to the needs of future generations and a notion of trans-generational unity.

In the foreword that she wrote just before her death for the book *Down To Earth*, that she would have co-authored with Erik Eckholm, and which Erik Eckholm completed himself, Barbara Ward, with her usual unforgettable eloquence and perspicacity, left us this invaluable message:

> "No matter how much we try to think of ourselves as separate sovereign entities, nature itself reminds us of humanity's basic unity. The vision of unity shared by so many of the great philosophers and so central to all the great religions is recognized now as an inescapable scientific fact. Could it be the vocation of this generation to give the planet the institutions of unity and cooperation that can express this insight?"

Mr Chairman, I think her words most amply define the institutions we are after in the closing years of this century, and sets the vocation of all of us who wish to work together to save the environment and humanity's share in its benefits. We at the United Nations University stand ready to turn our hand to this task, in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme and others of like dedication.

Thank you very much.