

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

CONFERENCES PARALLEL TO THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE
ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Stockholm, June 1972

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment provided an occasion for a new and particularly interesting development, the holding of a series of parallel conferences, the most important of which was the Environment Forum which was held in a building linked by a shuttle service to the official conference building. The activities of the Forum included lectures, discussion groups and film shows, organized by a number of groups of scientists, the majority of whom were young.

The activities of the Dai Dong group took place in premises known as the AEF-Huset. Dai Dong (the name is derived from a Chinese concept according to which the whole world is a single family) is a scientific movement of European and North American intellectuals of pacifist convictions. Their meetings began several days before the opening of the Conference.

The chief purpose of the Forum was to provide a medium for the expression of the views of such bodies as the Institute of Scientists for Public Information (a private institution the members of which are American scientists interested in problems of the environment and of scientific development) and the Oi Committee ⁽¹⁾ (an International Committee of Young Scientists and Scholars for a Critical and Holistic Approach to Development and the Human Environment).

The Forum and Dai Dong were the most important of the parallel conferences. Representatives of liberation movements, Indian delegations from the United States, as well as Japanese sufferers from Minamata sickness had been invited.

A series of press conferences (two or three a day) enabled official delegates and journalists to put questions to well-known specialists such as Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich, Josué de Castro and Margaret Mead.

The participants in these parallel conferences were chiefly young Europeans and Americans, whilst the Forum included a considerable number of young people from the Third World, and even ordinary citizens and tourists.

(1) The name Oi is derived from the initial letters of a Swahili proverb, "Ote iwappo", meaning "All that is, must be considered".

Young scientists from developing countries were able to participate thanks to a contribution of \$140,000 from the Swedish Government. The presence of well-known specialists and the liveliness of the debates - on such subjects as development strategies and international relations, population growth, the redistribution of resources, "ecological warfare", attitudes and values which affect the environment, town planning, etc. - account for the dynamism of these conferences as compared with the somewhat conventional debates of the United Nations Conference.

Nevertheless, credit must be given to the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference, Mr. Strong, for having realized the importance and the interest of these gatherings and their undoubted effect on the progress of the official conference.

The People's Forum, which includes 40 political organizations and associations, undertook to draw up a programme of action. The mutually complementary nature of Forum and People's Forum is worthy of note. The former states the problems in technical and scientific terms; the latter endeavours to achieve results through committed political action and, in this way, is gradually paving the way for international action to offset the somewhat negative influence of the United Nations in environmental matters.

The participation of the Pow Wow Group in the activities of the People's Forum must also be mentioned. This group encouraged participants to express themselves with complete freedom in the production of a series of panels, thus giving imagination a free rein. The group's exhibition, something on the lines of [the French collection of May 1968 slogans] "Les murs ont la parole", was an interesting one. The preservation of the environment at the present time is not a matter which concerns governments, scientists or political organizations alone, but one which involves all the earth's inhabitants.

The main organization among those using the airfield was Hog Farm. After launching the proposal for a whaling moratorium, its members proposed a ten-year moratorium on the killing of human beings. Maurice Strong came in person to receive the text of this moratorium after the great "Festival of Life" of Wednesday 14 June.

The latter was not merely a picturesque happening, but allowed various questions to be raised: Is man our main concern or not? Should campaigns for the preservation of the environment, plants, animals, be tolerated - particularly in developed countries - while people in the Third World are dying of hunger, poverty, colonial and racial oppression?

Final declarations

(a) At the last session of the Environment Forum, some members of the Institute of Scientists for Public Information published a report which was extremely critical of the results of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. This report, presented by Professor Barry Commoner of Washington University, St. Louis (United States) points out that most of the steps which might be taken to stop the rapid deterioration of the environment were either ignored by the Conference or advocated with too little conviction.

Analysing the Conference resolutions, Professor Commoner declared that too much attention had been paid to particular and relatively unimportant aspects of the problems of the environment. He also emphasized that the Conference had ascribed too much importance to projects for the preservation of micro-organisms, insects, animals and plants. The protection of all species was undoubtedly important from the ecological point of view, but no steps had been taken to protect man himself. The resolutions of the Conference were far-reaching as regards the protection of micro-organisms from extermination, but suggested no means of preventing, for example, the massacre of the people of Indochina or of protecting those whose life was threatened by the danger of nuclear weapons; nothing was said either of the genetic dangers threatening all those who were exposed to mutagenic chemical pollution. Too little attention had been paid to people working in dangerous environments, for example workers in chemical industries or agricultural workers exposed to chemical pesticides. Inadequately protected, these agricultural and industrial workers often acted as guinea-pigs for others. The main criticism levelled at the Conference concerned its almost total indifference towards the economic problems connected with the crisis of the environment.

This report also criticizes the measures proposed for birth control, which will remain ineffective as long as human beings continue to be in thrall to their most basic needs and exposed to mortal danger.

The report states that the reasons for the failure of the Conference were the political compromises which had to be made. The Conference rendered only a limited service to mankind.

(b) The crisis of the environment ⁽¹⁾ in industrialized capitalist countries and in those of the Third World is due to the wrong emphasis given to development and technology, and to a social system based on private profit and military requirements rather than on the needs of man.

The participants strongly rejected "models of stagnation proposed by certain alarmist Western ecologists, economists, industrialists and computer-fans", and asserted that "holding economic growth per se responsible for environmental ills amounts to a diversion of attention from the real causes of the problem which lie in the profit-motivation of the systems of production in the capitalist world".

Agricultural Development

"The programme of agricultural development known as 'the Green Revolution', which is lauded as the answer to the world's food problems, rural unemployment and social stratification, is in reality a package solution involving pesticides, fertilizers, 'improved' seeds, irrigation and mechanization, which does irreparable harm to the human environment. This approach has caused severe chemical pollution, elimination of irreplaceable genetic plant materials, increased vulnerability of the agricultural production systems, crop failures, famines, threats to human health from new diseases..."

In summary, far from serving the long-term interests of the rural masses, the so-called Green Revolution has resulted in more profits for the agricultural-business complexes (chemical, machinery, etc.) of the expansionist industrial states."

(1) Declaration of the Oi Committee.

Public Health

"In the field of public health the same disparity...is evident. For example, the present distribution of malaria corresponds closely with the boundaries of the Third World. Malaria eradication programmes, based on massive spraying of DDT and other persistent pesticides, have failed to dislodge the disease from developing countries. In Central America and Mexico the incidence of malaria is just as high or higher now, in spite of well over a decade of intensive spraying with DDT and other pesticides. In other places such as Ceylon, India, Iran and Ethiopia, there has been considerable resurgence of the disease following the apparent initial success. Meanwhile the world's greatest accumulation of pesticides in body-fat and human milk has been reported in countries like India and Guatemala, where the intensive insecticidal campaign against malaria as well as agricultural uses have been practiced for a long time." The participants therefore demanded the immediate institution of environmentally more positive biological and cultural methods, and asserted that "the present disease eradication programmes based on simplistic chemical strategies are a diversion from the more urgent and effective task of social reorganization which would lead to better living and health conditions and facilities and would ultimately free the people of the Third World not only from malaria but also from other diseases".

Population

"It has often been suggested that the root cause of environmental problems is that the world is 'overpopulated'; thus population control is demanded as a solution". What was needed, in the view of participants was "a process which releases the internal mechanisms by which a population stabilizes itself. The emphasis must be placed on generating a consciousness among people to relate their immediate interests to the broader and long-term interests of the community as a whole. This consciousness...must be preceded by a reorganization of society and the system of production for an equitable distribution of resources".

Rural Development and Urbanization

"In many Third World countries expansionist and capitalist technologies such as the 'Green Revolution' have replaced human labour by capital-intensive technology. This has forced rural people to migrate to the cities, resulting in high imbalance between urban and rural areas. This in turn has produced gross social, economic, and political injustices."

Humanizing Technology

"Technology must be reoriented towards more egalitarian goals to account for the social welfare of peoples and their liberation from oppression by privileged and powerful classes with vested economic interests. Furthermore, the concept of the 'transfer of technology' which is supposedly designed for the adaptation of technology to Third World environments is a myth and purely paternalistic in outlook. It fails to consider the social and economic context in which decisions are made regarding the adoption of technologies."

Science and Social Responsibility

The participants rejected the concept of 'neutrality of science and education'. "They can be used to enslave man or to liberate him. Man is a social and historical being and as such has the capacity to change his world of today, which is one of oppression, to the world of tomorrow, which will be one of liberation."

The participants stated in conclusion: "We do not believe that the United Nations organization will be able to find solutions to the problems of mankind so long as it is directed and controlled by the very powerful expansionist industrial and military states which oppress the peoples of the exploited world...We assert that the problems of this world can only be solved by the people. Therefore we call on all the people of the world to intensify their struggle against the forces that oppress us."

(c) The development of urban agglomerations and of supersonic transport were among the main subjects considered at all the parallel conferences.

A stop should be put to the growth of vast conurbations and to the concentration of population in urban areas, which are evidence of the disparity between conditions of life in town and country.

Because they have expanded out of all proportion, large towns have ceased to be the ideal meeting places and cultural centres of a former age. Megalopolis is increasingly falling prey to tensions of all sorts and becoming a place where the physical and moral quality of life is deteriorating. Fatigue, neurosis, noise, distances, polluted air, the quantity of rubbish, the lack of open spaces, the serious problem of water supply are all negative factors which, quite apart from violence and crime, ought to persuade us to change our point of view radically as far as the size of towns is concerned.

The individualization of leisure equipment (radio, television, gramophone, cinema) is depriving the town of its monopoly as a cultural and leisure centre.

We must look towards small communities in which life is much closer to nature, human contacts are made easily and every individual can have a feeling of personal fulfilment by involvement in the life of the community. But this implies a decentralized infrastructure in all fields of activity - economic, political and administrative, scientific and cultural; in other words, a new scale of values is required in order to evaluate technological innovations and their use, and a new meaning must be given to development and to other fundamental criteria for the choice of objectives, and planning.

The concern expressed both in the official Conference and in the parallel conferences on the subject of supersonic aircraft is proof of a completely new phenomenon in Western technological thinking. If man is less enthusiastic about efforts to increase the speed of travel, it is because, for the first time, instead of supporting "progress at any price", he wants to know just what the price is.

(d) "Human beings (1) live as a part of a complex natural system with aspects of interdependence which have only recently become dramatically evident...

"The interaction between the social and natural systems on this planet has in our time resulted in an environmental crisis which although it has been produced largely by the economic practices of the industrial nations, effects

(1) Declaration of the Dai Dong Group on the Environment.

every person on earth. The awareness of the environmental crisis has come upon us suddenly and it has come at a time when the deprived nations and the poor and deprived people in all nations are struggling for power to control their own destinies...

"It is imperative for the well-being and even the survival of humanity that the condition of the natural environment and the needs of human beings be considered as interrelated parts of the same problem. This will require the introduction of profound changes into both our political, economic and social structures and our individual life-styles, with the aim not only one of survival, but of survival with maximum possibility of human fulfilment. For such a transition, certain guiding principles must be followed.

"I. Human beings inhabit the earth, but not they alone...All life is dependent on the transactions of matter and energy carried out in earth's eco-systems. It is these transactions which we are altering, even before we fully comprehend them. The people of the world must come to understand them, to preserve them and, when altering them, to do it with care and wisdom. To develop this understanding, we must establish programmes of intensive education about the interrelatedness of the world's problems.

"II. There is a fundamental conflict between traditional concepts of economic growth and the preservation of the environment... It has become clear that a more rational distribution of industrial power is necessary if the global problems of environment and society are to be solved. Such a redistribution would achieve at the same time a more equal apportionment of economic and political benefits among nations and individuals.

"III. The exploitation of national and regional resources by foreign corporations, with a consequent outflow of profits from the exploited regions, has resulted in a vast and growing economic disparity among nations and a monopoly of industrialized countries over-production, energy, technology, information and political power... The authority of any region's people over resources and environment must include the obligation to recognize that the environment is an indivisible whole, not subject to political barriers. The environment must be protected from avoidable pollution, destruction and exploitation from all sources.

"IV. It is obvious that human population growth cannot continue indefinitely in a finite environment with finite resources. At the same time, population is one of a number of factors, none of which in the long run is the most important or the most decisive in affecting the human environment. In fact...population is not a single global or biological problem, but one which has a complex inter-relationship with the social, economic and natural environments of man...

"As long as resources are wasted, as they manifestly are, it is deceptive to describe population growth as if this were the source of all evils...

"V. Economic development of any kind will require technology. Some products proliferated by conventional technology are very harmful ecologically...Ecologically sound technologies will minimize stresses to the environment... It is not enough to add anti-pollution devices to existing technologies, although this might well be the initial stage of phasing out present polluting technologies.

"VI. The culture of the industrial nations reflects their political and economic ideology, and is based on an ever-increasing accumulation of material goods and an uncritical reliance on technology to solve humanity's problems. This ideology, in which the ethical element is a forgotten dimension, is spreading throughout the world...many people in industrial countries, faced with a reduction in their material possessions, will need to find new definitions of progress in values compatible with environmental and social well-being..."

"Arms expenditures are a burden on rich and poor nations alike. Military technology, being such a large part of industrial activity, particularly in economically developed countries, is a major cause of global pollution and resource depletion. Thus, war and preparation for war are both directly related to environmental problems. With nuclear proliferation, both civil and military, the environmental hazard has become increasingly critical, arms control more difficult and nuclear war more probable. The enormous sums consumed in military expenditures must be applied directly to the task of global redistribution and environmental improvement. As long as we tolerate this waste and destructiveness of war itself, we cannot achieve the stable environment on which the survival of all of us depends..."

(e) Similarly, eleven international non-governmental youth organizations, which had been invited to attend the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, made a point of issuing a declaration in which, after acknowledging the efforts made by the Secretary-General of the Conference and the Swedish Government, they stated that the environmental crisis which the human race was facing had reached such proportions that there could be no way out short of radical long-term solutions. They also stated that the existence of wasted national and economic interests which had caused the failure of the UNCTAD Conference in Santiago a few weeks previously militated against the adoption of such solutions. In their declaration, these NGOs expressed regret at the absence from the Conference of certain countries. They demanded immediate action to prevent the destruction of the environment by warfare. They regretted that discussions on nuclear experiments and on supersonic transport had been excluded from the Conference. They also regretted that the Conference had made only passing mention of the importance of education, which was a fundamental factor in the public's awareness of its responsibility towards the environment. Mindful of their involvement in the struggle to help young people to respect ecological principles and to live in harmony with nature, these organizations demanded that the United Nations and the Member States should give priority to outlining, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations, a programme of environmental education.

Among the causes of the deterioration in our natural environment, the most important, in their view, was the fact that industrialized countries were banking on a form of growth characterized firstly by a feverish rate of consumption and, secondly, by the exploitation of the resources of countries which had had no chance to achieve a decent standard of living. Multi-national companies which are outside the control of individual governments, and whose profits bring no benefit to the countries in which they operate, are the chief instruments of this process. In the view of the NGOs, a further cause of deterioration was the wastage of resources for military purposes in an incessant arms race which made not the slightest contribution to the progress of man.

These NGOs admitted that the exponential growth of the population can be a serious obstacle to the quality of life, especially as regards food and housing. This growth, it was claimed, is particularly serious in industrialized countries because of the intensive consumption and the wastage of natural resources.

Lastly the NGOs warmly welcomed the recommendations made by the Commission for Development and Environment to the effect that the measures taken by industrialized countries should not constitute a form of discrimination against exports from developing countries, and that a system of compensation should finally be adopted by the majority of countries. They also supported the Commission's appeal for a study to be made of the possibility of substituting natural for synthetic products. They also insisted on the importance of making intensive use of manpower in order to ensure full employment, in preference to a policy for the intensive use of capital.

(f) The International Youth Conference on the Human Environment held with Unesco assistance from 26 to 30 August 1971 at Hamilton (Canada) had studied ways in which young people and youth organizations could participate in the campaign in favour of the environment. This Conference, attended by 166 delegates from 75 countries and 102 observers, was the first in which a large number of young people from developing countries were able to take part, chiefly through help from Unesco.

The Hamilton Conference appointed delegates to represent it at Stockholm to make known their point of view and their declaration on the environment, and decided to organize the youth forum which was held in parallel to the United Nations Conference. The Hamilton Declaration, submitted in plenary session at Stockholm by the spokesman appointed by the 1971 Conference, anticipated the standpoint of young people at the forum by emphasizing particularly the rôle of Unesco in this field.

The delegates to the Hamilton Conference declared that Unesco should be commended for its efforts to include the study of science in educational syllabuses. Unesco should now help to make the study of ecology part of school syllabuses throughout the world. In addition, the Organization should help all teachers (of whatever subject) to spread a knowledge of ecology.

The Hamilton declaration also specifies that Unesco should sponsor a historical study of civilization from the ecological point of view. There is a precedent for this: the "History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Development", a six-volume work prepared under the auspices of Unesco. Numerous authors have shown how the environment has influenced the behaviour of man and the course of history, but no complete historical study has ever been written on this subject.

In view of the efforts made by Unesco to eliminate illiteracy and to supply educational material to people who have had little education, the Organization should undertake to disseminate, throughout the world, complete, unexpurgated and objective information on the environment, and set up a commission to that end.

(g) An exhibition prepared by Peter Harper and his team was held with Unesco help on the subject of soft technology. This exhibition gave an opportunity to groups of young scientists and artists to put forward their ideas on an alternative technology. The basic principle is to simplify technology so that it can be understood and appreciated by members of the community. The participants endeavoured to prove the advantages of technological decentralization to enable each region to exercise control over production and distribution and to be self-supporting.

An attempt was also made to show that a technology adapted to the conditions of community life, that is to say a technology using available natural resources and materials which can be renewed and recycled locally, is capable of satisfying local needs with the co-operation of users.

The soft technology exhibition illustrated among other things the possibilities offered by the use of natural resources such as solar energy and tides.

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