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Environment, Development and the Developing Countries

by

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A Divided World:

With the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the Soviet Union itself, the cold war, waged relentlessly since the Second World War, had subsided and there was some respite. But the world is still deeply divided. The "great divide" today is between the rich and the poor. As the former Finance Minister of Pakistan, Dr. Mehbood ul Haq pointed out:

"A poverty curtain has descended right across the face of our world, dividing it materially and philosophically into two different worlds, two separate planets, two unequal humanities — one embarrassingly rich and the other desperately poor. This invisible barrier exists within nations as well as between them, and often provides a unity of thought and purpose to the Third World countries which otherwise have their own economic, political and cultural differences. The struggle to lift this curtain of poverty is certainly the most formidable challenge of our time".

The ever-widening gap between the developed rich countries of the North and the underdeveloped, courteously called "developing", miserable

poor countries of the South has become a cliché. It is no longer a gap, it is a chasm. On one side are about two dozen or so industrialized countries (including the United States, West European community, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan) whose 1.2 billion citizens live in an environment of relative abundance, with per capita income varying between 19,000 to 27,000 US dollars per annum, produce most of the world's manufactured goods, consume most of the world's resources, and enjoy history's highest standard of living. On the other are more than 120 underdeveloped nations – more than 4.5 billion people – which struggle to survive on per capita incomes ranging between 350 and 600 US dollars. In 1990, some 30 developing countries, including some of the populous countries of South Asia, had a per capita income of \$400 or less, with a median value of about \$ 200, almost one hundredth of the per capita income of the most developed countries.6

The simple fact is that most people in underdeveloped countries do not have enough to eat. Today, 85 per cent of the world's income goes to 23 per cent of its people – the affluent consumers. By contrast, more than 1 billion people, the absolute poor, survive on less than one dollar a day. It is a bitter truth that one-third to one-half of human beings in these poor countries suffer from hunger or malnutrition. One in three children is

malnourished and 20 to 25 per cent of them die before their fifth birthday. And millions who do not die lead impeded lives because their brains have been damaged and bodies stunted by nutritional deficiencies. About 3 million children die annually from diseases that could be averted by immunization. Some one billion people cannot read or write, and more than 100 million children of primary school age are not in school. This is "absolute poverty" of "marginal" human beings, men and women barely surviving on the margin of life under conditions so degraded by disease, illiteracy, malnutrition, and squalor as to deny them basic human necessities. They are trapped in a "condition of life so degrading as to insult human dignity – and yet a condition of life so common as to be the lot of 40 per cent", some 2.4 billion peoples of the developing countries.

Millions of human beings in the Third World have just no homes. Other millions live in houses or huts in slums and tenements made of corrugated iron sheets, cardboard boxes, or such other easily destructible materials in overcrowded cities. they have no running water and no toilets. These luxuries they cannot afford. Health services are rarely within walking distance, and have to be paid for. Primary education may be available and free but often children are needed for work. There is generally no social security or unemployment pay, and so many people — some 500 million

according to some estimates – are without any kind of employment.

On the other hand, with the "blessings" of science and technology, the rich countries have reached a level of prosperity which the previous generations would have found difficult to imagine. In fact it has created the problem of over-affluence. The problems of "overweight society" and "overdevelopment" are as common in our age as those of underdevelopment. The fact that less than 7 per cent of the world's population consumes more than 67 per cent of the world's wealth indicates a voracious appetite for new materials and resources at the cost of the rest of the world. Most of the raw materials and minerals produced in the developing countries go to the industrialized countries. Indeed, never in history has there been so much waste, together with so much destruction of environment, as we have witnessed during the last few decades.¹⁰

Legacy of the Colonial Age

There is a general and widespread feeling, not only in the underdeveloped States but even in Western industrialized countries as well, that the latter are largely responsible for the poverty of the Third World. Thus, explaining his views on the "development of underdevelopment", André Gunder Frank points out.

"Contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of

past and continuing economic and other relations between satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries". 13

Walter Rodney also in his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) says:

"The developed and underdeveloped parts of the present capitalist section of the world have been in continuous contact for four and a half centuries. The contention here is that over that period Africa helped to develop Western Europe in the same proportion as Western Europe helped to under-develop Africa". 14

The search for new markets motivated the European countries' expansion all through the nineteenth century and still does so today. After the occupation and control of India and its markets Europe undermined much of the local textile industry in Africa by bringing in textiles from India, thus adding to the destruction of African commerce, mining and industry. These Indian textiles in Africa and also in America, then began to be replaced by textiles from Britain. It is well-known how the British proceeded to destroy the Indian textile industry by eliminating competition from Indian textiles through an elaborated network of restrictions and prohibitive duties. Even within India, taxes effectively discriminated against

local cloth. The resulting hardship was great for the Indian weavers. Sir Charles Trevelyan declared to a Parliamentary enquiry in 1840:

"The population of Dacca has fallen from 150,000 to 30,000 or 40,000 and the jungle and malaria are fast encroaching upon the town... Dacca which used to be the Manchester of India, has fallen off from a flourishing town to a very poor and small one".

Not only textiles, but the iron and steel industry were destroyed as well. The duties imposed on Indian exports into Britain were, in spite of the "free trade" policies being promoted at the time, 5 to 25 times higher than the duties that were allowed on British imports into India. The destruction was completed by physical means, where necessary.

There thus began the gradual process of the conversion of the dominated territories into markets for the products of European industry and suppliers of raw material and primary commodities. The theories of free trade and comparative advantage have held powerful sway in the West and are propounded, as a scientific explanation of reality. But Adam Smith and Ricardo, and their "neo-classical" successors, produced their theories on free trade only after the British had established their industrial pre-eminence. In the beginning, they not only destroyed the long-established industries of others, but protected their own from competition.

The use of force to open up new markets was common practice. China was forced to open its markets and legalise even the banned opium trade after the Opium war in 1840 when the British fleet attacked China. When towards the end of the nineteenth century, Britain's industrial pre-eminence was threatened by other European powers, they and Britain embarked on another process of colonization, this time mainly in Africa, in order to obtain for themselves protected markets abroad. The struggle for markets led the Europeans to fight among themselves which culminated in the First World War of 1914-18.

The inexorable conversion of the dominated areas in Asia and Africa into markets for European manufactured goods and suppliers of primary commodities and raw materials for European industries undermined not only their previous self-sufficiency in manufactures, but increasingly their ability to feed themselves. Colonies were converted into virtual plantations (or mines) producing one or two crops (or mineral products) for export to Europe for their burgeoning industries.¹⁸

Continuing Exploitation

One need not dwell in the past only when the Asian-African countries, under colonial domination, had no choice. Unfortunately, the exploitation of

the poor countries still continues through subtle and sophisticated means and under an economic order which is merely a continuation of the hated colonial era. Although colonialism has died a natural death, the international framework of the old order has been kept intact by the more pragmatic and self-confident colonial powers. The "white man's burden" in respect of the impoverished, conquered and humiliated natives of the Third World still continues through the developed countries' superiority and dominant voice in the international economic system. The division of labour between developed and underdeveloped countries, imposed in the colonial era, still continues and it is difficult to escape from it. Developed countries, or rather their business interests and transnational corporations, are unwilling to share their technology. Trade secrets are jealously guarded and markets are dominated by companies of the developed countries, and it is difficult for newcomers to enter them. The prices charged for manufactured goods are largely monopoly prices, and in any case they rise steadily over time.

International Monetary System:

The international monetary system and the international economic institutions, created after the Second World War by the Bretton Woods Agreement amongst the industrialized rich countries, established the basis of progress in the industrial world while completely ignoring the needs and

demands of the developing countries. The present international monetary system has been described as "unfair, unequal, unsuitable, uncertain and inconsistent". The poor nations have hardly any participation in the economic decision-making of the world. Their advice is never solicited when the big ten industrialized nations get together to take key decisions on the world's economic future. Their voting strength in the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and I.M.F.) is less than one-third of the total; and their numerical majority in the UN General Assembly, as we shall see, has meant no real influence on international economic decisions.

Poor Countries Produce only Primary Commodities and Raw MaterialaL

Underdeveloped countries, still producing mainly primary commodities and raw materials for the developed economies, have several problems. The prices for their primary commodities and raw materials fall not only in relative and sometimes in absolute terms, but they fluctuate widely from year to year; their economies are highly dependent on exports and many of them are highly dependent on the export of new, sometimes just one or two, commodities. The fluctuations in commodity prices can be dramatic and are accentuated by speculation in commodity markets in London, outside the control of the underdeveloped countries. In the mid-

1970s, for instance, the price of sugar dropped from 64 cents a pound to 6 cents a pound in 18 months. Tanzania's sisal price dropped from 90 pounds to 60 pounds. The Brandt Report, referring to Zambia, pointed out that a boom in copper prices took the price to \$ 3034 in April 1974; but it fell to \$ 1290 before the end of the year. It may also be remembered that according to the Brandt Report, in the seventies, more than half the developing countries, excluding the oil-exporting countries, got more than half of their export earnings only from one or two commodities. Zambia got 94 per cent from copper; Mauritius 90 per cent from sugar; Cuba 84 per cent from sugar, and Gambia 85 per cent from groundnuts and groundnut oil. 21

The developed countries have always refused to discuss the problem of raw materials in an integrated scheme because they claim it is in conflict with the system of free enterprise. How "free" the system is can be seen from the fact that while heavy tariffs are levied on industrial goods imported from the developing countries (to discourage their industrialization) low duties are imposed on raw materials imported from these countries. As Dr. Mehbub ul Haq has pointed out, the rich nations are making it increasingly impossible for the "free" international market mechanism to work. The cornerstone of the free market mechanism is based, he points out, on the free movement of labour and capital as well as goods and services so that

rewards to factors of production are equalized all over the world. Yet immigration laws in all the rich nations make it impossible for any large-scale movement of unskilled labour in a world-wide search for economic opportunities. Only highly skilled labour is permitted to move on a very restrictive basis which, in the form of "brain drain", helps only the rich nations at the cost of the poor. Not much capital is permitted to cross international boundaries either because of poor countries' sensitivities or rich nations' own needs.

Farm Subsidies in the Developed Countries:

Additional barriers have been raised against the free movement of goods and services. For example, over 20 billion dollars in farm subsidies alone are paid to farmers in the rich nations to protect their agriculture, and progressively higher tariffs and quotas are enforced against the simple consumer goods exports of the developing countries. The rich thus are drawing a protective wall around their life styles, telling the poor nations that they can compete neither with their labour nor with their goods. ²²

The UN Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission), also pointed out in its report, *Our Common Future*, that agriculture

"production in industrialized countries has usually been highly subsidized

and protected from international competition. These subsidies have encouraged the overuse of soil and chemicals, the pollution of water resources and foods with these chemicals and the degradation of the countryside. Much of this effort has produced surpluses and their associated financial burdens. And some of this surplus has been sent at concessional rates to the developing world, where it has undermined the farming policies of recipient nations".

Direct or indirect subsidies, which now cover the entire food cycle, according to the Commission, have become very expensive. In the United States, the cost of farm support had grown from \$ 2.7 billion in 1980 to \$ 25.8 billion in 1986. In the EEC such costs had risen from \$ 6.2 billion in 1976 to \$ 21.5 billion in 1986. It is politically more attractive and cheaper to export surpluses – often as food aid – rather than store them. These highly subsidized surpluses depress the international market prices of commodities like sugar and rice and create severe problems for developing countries. 24

Developed Countries Control Prices of Raw Materials and Industiral goods:

In fact as absolute masters of the market for the purchase of raw materials, the developed countries buy them at the prices they fix. Furthermore, as absolute masters of the market for manufactured goods, they sell them at the prices they desire. The result is that soap, cotton, paper, iron ore, copper, etc. – all raw materials – are bought in the developing countries

for the price of a slice of bread and the products come back to them at prices they cannot afford to pay. A banana-exporting country receives only 70 cents out of \$ 6.00 which represents the sale price abroad of a box of bananas produced inthat country. While the prices of primary products have been historically depressed, the prices of manufactured goods have been constantly buoyant. For more than a quarter of a century before they took control of their product, the oil-producing countries received only one-tenth of each dollar paid by the oil consumers in the industrialized countries that imported oil, while the rest went into the coffers of the monopolistic companies or their governments.²⁵ This has resulted in what has been called the steady deterioration in terms of trade. Mathematically, the poorest must continue to grow poorer while the rich continue to get richer. There is little wonder that poor, pressured and powerless, the primary producers have been confined to the periphery of international economic relations while the wheels of power and control are turned by the industrialized States operating them at the centre. The constant deterioration in terms of trade led to a decline in the share of the developing countries from 21.3 per cent in 1960 to 17.6 per cent in 1970, while their external debt quadrupled in ten years exceeding 80 billion US dollars. Since then the economic situation of the developing countries has much worsened.".²⁶

Developing countries were particularly hit in the 1980s because of stagnation in world trade and falling commodity prices. According to the Brundtland Commission, "between 1980 and 1984, developing countries lost about \$ 55 billion in export earnings because of the fall in commodity prices, a blow felt most keenly in Latin America and Africa". Over half of all developing countries actually experienced declining per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in the years 1982-85 and per capita GDP fell, for developing countries as a whole, by around 10 per cent in the 1980s.

What we need is a rational reordering of global priorities and global resources. By far the biggest share of available resources is being diverted to the most unproductive area of human activity: armaments and arsenals. Mankind is spending over a thousand billion dollars every year on the means of its own destruction. This figures out to about two million dollars per minute in perfecting our path to extinction. We need a world order which is more than a dance of death. We need a new world order which helps in saving mankind and fulfilling the human personality. But this is possible only by large-scale disarmament which has become feasible when the world is no longer divided into political groups devoted to ideological wrangling and destruction.

Developing Countries Demand Change:

Ever since their political independence in the 1940s and 1950s, the developing countries have been demanding a change in their lives. They have asserted with reason that they could not continue with their hopeless lives; that political independence without economic freedom was of little consequence; that the developed countries were largely responsible for their misery; that the economic order created after the Second World War was inequitable, unjust and unreasonable; that they must get a new economic order which was more humane and would help them in their development. But all pleadings to change the inequitable economic system, their demands for help, and their appeals for consideration went unheeded and were simply ignored. No State enjoying privileges would be prepared to give them up of its own free will. There was a clear lack of will on the part of the rich countries. The fundamental problems remained the same as during the colonial period: inequality in the terms of trade; stabilization of forces and markets for primary commodities; access to the market of the developed countries; and a generalised system of preference.

Pleas for a New International Economic Order:

Unable to get any concessions from the developed countries, who simply ignored them, by 1960 the developing countries joined hands together to put an end to the present inequitable system that tended to impoverish their

entire world. They were sick of being meek and started making their demands more militantly. The "damned of the earth", resigned and submissive until then, changed themselves into confident and revolutionary advocates of a new order learning about themselves and the earth in the course of the struggle. There was nothing fatal, they asserted, about what was modestly called the deterioration in the terms of trade. It was the operation of a deliberate system which was fundamentally bad. To put an end to this situation the international community must evolve a new system which would bring greater justice and equity to international economic relations. It was unjust, they felt, that the prices of manufactured goods fixed by the economic powers should surge ahead while the prices for the primary commodities necessary for the manufacture of those products were maintained at the same level or were even allowed to decline by the same powers. They wanted to take steps to index the prices of the products exported by the developing countries to tie them to the prices of the manufactured and capital goods they must import. They asked for some correlation between the prices of raw materials and those of manufactured goods. The developed countries must also open their markets, they demanded, to the products of the developing countries by doing away with the protectionist barriers which led to decrease of exports by the

underdeveloped countries.

Resolutions in the General Assembly:

In order to put maximum pressure on the rich industrialized countries the United Nations General Assembly, where the turbulent countries of the Third World had come to constitute a solid and virtually unbeatable majority, was used in the 1970s as a forum in the economic campaign of the developing countries. Forming a new consortium – the Group of 77 – containing actually more than 125 members, the poor countries used all the diplomatic pressure they could muster in their struggle for a new deal. They used the popular forum to declare the 1960s as the first UN Development Decade and the 1970s as the second Development Decade; organized the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development on a regular basis to focus on the needs of the developing countries; established a UN Capital Fund; and formed a Special Committee on Trade Preference. In 1974 and 1975 they called two special sessions (VI and VII) of the General Assembly to discuss their problem of raw materials and do something about it. At these sessions the developing countries spoke boldly, even bluntly, and put their demands very forcefully. They accused the rich countries of the west of wasting energy and minerals, building weapons they did not need, polluting the air and the oceans, eating too much and contributing to the starvation of others. They got two resolutions adopted by the General Assembly (G.A. Resolutions 3201 and 3202 (S-VI) containing the Establishment of the New International Economic Order and the Declaration and Programme of Action. The first resolution proclaimed the "united determination" of the Members of the United Nations "to work urgently for the establishment of a new international economic order", and laid down general principles on which the new economic order should be founded. The second spelt out the programme of action to be carried out for the purpose of achieving the above ideal and for bringing about the maximum possible "economic cooperation and understanding among all States, particularly between developed and developing countries, based on the principle of dignity and sovereign equality".

Utter Failure

But despite all this pressure and all the resolutions by the General Assembly and other organs of the United Nations, all efforts by the poor countries to better their lot failed miserably. Instead of getting better their economic condition further deteriorated in the 1970s and even more in the 1980s. In 1980, as the Brundtland commission noted, the total number of poor people not getting enough calories to prevent stunted growth and

serious health risks had increased by 14 per cent since 1970 and numbered 340 million in 87 developing countries. The number of people living in slums and shanty towns, the Commission pointed out, was rising not falling. A growing number lacked access to clean water and sanitation and hence were prey to diseases that arose from this lack. 36

Industrialised countries Richer But Not Better

But along with the deteriorating conditions of the poor in the ever shrinking world society, leading to tensions and confrontations between the rich and the poor, as we have seen above, there came a realisation in the late 1960s that while the rich were getting richer by exploiting the poor through an economic system which was a legacy of the colonial age, they were not necessarily getting better. In the process of getting an economically richer life, in their relentless struggle for luxuries, by introducing more and more sophisticated, massive and novel technology in their ever-expanding industrialization, they were destroying the very life-support system of the earth. The environmental consequences of industrialisation and economic development, and the pollution of the air, water and land which give us sustenance was indeed a high price that they had to pay for economic advancement. It came to be widely accepted that environmental pollution was an inescapable by-product of industrial development. Life could only be

sustained through a delicate equilibrium between man and nature. Blind to the need of cooperating with nature, the equilibrium seemed to be menaced by the pressure of increasing population, but even more importantly, by the strain of pollution generated by the developing technologies in large-scale industrialization. The vast use of energy and new materials, industrial effluents, urbanization and consumer habits in the developed countries were leading the industrialized countries on a course which could alter dangerously, if not irreversibly, the natural system of our planet upon which our biological survival depended. Already rivers had "caught fire", lakes and inland seas – the Baltic and the the Mediterranean – were under threat from untreated wastes threatening marine life. The burning of fossil fuel was increasing with unforeseeable consequences for the earth's climate and atmosphere. Even the vast oceans were becoming far more vulnerable to man's polluting activities than had been assumed. With too many poisons, insecticides and fertilizers running into the oceans, vast oil spills and longlife chemicals that were generated into the air or dumped into the sea, the oceans could not remain endless dumping grounds and a perpetual source of freshening winds and currents.³⁹ With the kind of technology that was coming into use by the industrialized countries – huge tankers with carrying capacities of 500,000 tons of crude oil, large nuclear power plants, toxic stock-piles of nerve gas and biological agents — with increasing possibilities of accidents with far-reaching consequences, some ecologists like Paul Ehrlich warned that everybody — the whole world — might "disappear in cloud of smoke in 20 years". Even if one did not subscribe to such doomsday threats, it was clear that the world could not avoid the possibility or even inevitability of a catastrophe if we did not do something about it.

Global Problem

It was realized that the problem of environmental pollution was a global problem which concerned all States irrespective of their size, stage of development, or ideology. Despite all the political and ideological divisions of the society, it was a small world indeed. There was no escape from the underlying unity and interconnection of the ocean world. The seas and oceans, like the winds above, mingled with each other, cleansed or poisoned each other, passed on each other's burdens, and made a seamless watery web. The sovereign States might proclaim their territorial controls and national independence; but airs brought in the acid rains, oceans carried toxic substances to other shores, and pollution moved from continent to continent. As Frances Cairncross said recently:

"Nature is no respecter of national boundaries. Across those dotted lines on the globe, winds blow, rivers flow and migrating species walk or fly. The dotted lines may carve up the earth, but the sea and the atmosphere remain open to all, to cherish or plunder. When people in one country harm that bit of the environment they assume to be theirs, many others may suffer too. But, how, and how much, can countries make their neighbours change their ways".

If United States, Russia or France tested nuclear weapons, the winds blew the fallout to other countries. As the winds and oceans flew round our little planet, Russia's Strontium–90 was as lethal as that of France, the England or the United States, and not only in their own countries. Thus it was pointed out that the danger of "irresponsible" disposal of radioactive wastes from nuclear energy plants was perhaps more of a threat to the security of other States than was the danger of war and conquest. Yet this is what is already happening. According to recent reports, "Asia is fast turning into waste dump for the west, having received five million tons of such high-tech cargo during the last four years". The rising environmental threat is reminding humanity of both its vulnerability and compulsion for common survival on a fragile planet.

Rising Expectations

But despite all these interdependences – in biosphere and technosphere alike – and realization that we did indeed belong to a single system and our survival depended on the balance and health of the total

system, it could not escape the serious attention of all perceptive observers that our small planet Earth was deeply divided. As the UN Secretary-General, U Thant, noted: "Squalid poverty lives side by side with overabundance on our earth. We have reached the moon but we have not reached each other". While the rich countries were risking the health of their people by over consumption, and endangering the planet by overindustrialization and industrial pollutants, two-thirds of humanity was groaning under the unbearable weight of abject poverty. But that was not all. In the shrinking world society, a growing number of these poor were waking up to the realization of how the people in the rich countries were living. As the image, ways of life and consumer habits of the rich countries, impressive evidence of prosperity, not to say of opulent living, of their peoples, were transmitted to the remotest corners of the world by the transistor, the communication satellites and the world-wide TV, ambitions to imitate them naturally arose awakening new aspirations. This new awareness gave rise to what was called the "revolution of rising expectations". The poor people knew that they did not have to be hungry; they wanted food and shelter; they wanted bicycles, refrigerators, radios, movies, and they wanted them soon. They came to realize that the only way to free themselves from long and humiliating servitude was to achieve the industrial base which was necessary

to provide them with adequate fighting capabilities, at least to defend themselves. This was the road adopted in the last century by Japan, and which in the modern age was attracting countries like China, India, Mexico, Brazil and others.

Poor Contribute to the Environmental Degradation

The national leaders in the developing countries, aware of the aspirations of their people, had no choice but to promise them an improving economic future. In their desperate efforts to achieve their goal, "modernize" and develop their economies, and create affluent societies like those in North America and Europe, the side effects were seldom taken into account. 44 It may be noticed that the environmental side effects were even more serious in the less-developed than in the developed countries. Thus, it had been found that nearly every irrigation project in the developing countries had been followed by outbreaks, sometimes disastrous, of waterborne diseases of humans or of animals. Some irrigation projects, like the pervasive system of dams on the Nile, or the modern canal system in West Punjab in Pakistan had induced large-scale geophysical changes which had, in turn, reduced the agricultural potential of the regions. Previously productive lands had been known to have been reduced in fertility or even completely destroyed by poorly managed irrigation systems. Problems of water-logging, alkalization,

cementation of soils and erosion of slopes, had been traced to the use of irrigation in many countries. Nearly every reported instance involving the chemical control of agricultural pests in newly developed agricultural areas had been characterized by serious ecological hazards. Case histories of technological improvements in animal husbandry and fisheries depicted the same picture of unexpected hazard. These ecological failures, it was felt, were not the random accidents of progress but evidence that introduction of new technology into the developing countries had adverse ecological consequences which were seldom taken into consideration. Thus, the poor countries, too occupied in their always unsuccessful attempts merely to survive, were contributing to the ever-growing environmental degradation.

But some economists did not hesitate to point out that the developing countries could never hope to achieve the consumption patterns of the developed countries. To raise the living standards of the world's existing population to American levels, the annual world-wide production would have to be increased 75 times, that of copper 100 times, that of lead 100 times, and that of tin 250 times. If a country like India were to use fertilizers at the per capita level of Holland, it would consume one-half of the total world output of fertilizers. Clearly, the parity of the developing countries

with the developed ones was not compatible with the existing stocks of natural resources. It was, therefore, suggested by some observers that for the survival of mankind the poor developing countries should remain in a state of underdevelopment because if the evils of industrialization were to reach them life on the planet would be in jeopardy. They were horrified to imagine the risk to human society if more than two-thirds of the "wretched of the earth" were also to try to live like Europeans or Japanese or sought American standards. The irony of the development is", it was warned, "that to the extent it succeeds, the world situation worsens".

Stockholm conference on Human Environment

In this continuous economic struggle in which the rich countries were trying to maintain and improve their life styles which the poor were trying to imitate and catch up with, environment was neglected and suffered terrible degradation until it was realized that it could no longer be ignored. In 1972 the U.N. Conference on Human Environment was called at Stockholm to take stock of the situation. At Stockholm for the first time several well-meaning environmentally conscious individuals, like Maurice Strong, Barbara Ward and others, brought to the world's attention the seriousness of the problem and the dire need which dictated that the Earth must be cleansed

of its foul air and water if the human species was to survive. But the poor countries reminded the rich nations that while they understood the need to protect the environment, they could not continue, or should not even be expected to continue, to linger in misery. They brought to the attention of the rich countries the distinction between the "pollution of affluence" and the "pollution of poverty" which was recognized by the Conference in its Declaration. It accepted the fact that "while in industrialized countries, environmental problems are generally related to industrialization and technological development", in the poor countries "most of the environmental problems are caused by under-development". 51 Although the developing countries were experiencing, in varying degrees, the environmental problems that arose in the course of growth and some industrialization, and were not unconcerned about the growing menace to the human environment, they were not and could not be convinced of the logic of non-development. The two-thirds of humanity who were barely surviving on the margin of life, could not equal the passionate alarm of the industrialized countries unless environmental issues could be equated with developmental issues. Poverty, they felt, was the greatest source of pollution. As a UN Panel of experts said in its report in 1971, in both the towns and the villages in the Third World,

"not merely the 'quality of life', but life itself is endangered by poor water, housing, sanitation and nutrition, by sickness and disease, and by natural disasters. These are the problems, no less than those of industrial pollution, that clamour for attention in the context for human environment".

Most of the people in the Third World were acutely aware that there were "two worlds, two planets, two humanities", said Pakistan's Mhabub ul Haq:

"In your world, there is a concern today about the quality of life; in our world, there is concern about life itself which is threatened by hunger and malnutrition. In your world, there is concern today about the conservation of non-renewable resources... In our world, the anxiety is not about the depletion of resources but about the best distribution and exploitation of these resources, for the benefit of all mankind rather than for the benefit of a few nations. While you are worried about industrial pollution, we are worried about the pollution of poverty, because our problems arise not out of excess of development and technology but because of lack of development and technology and inadequate control over natural phenomena. In the developed countries, you can afford to fuss about the adverse effects of DDT; we have to be concerned about what it means for our crops and for sustaining human lives. You can afford to be concerned about polluted beaches. We have to worry a lot about the fact that less than 10 per cent of the population in the Third World has even drinkable water". 53

He added that unfortunately "our two worlds, while they touch and meet, they rarely communicate. And it is that process of real communication, real dialogue, that we have to encourage today in case we have to equip ourselves to deal with the problems of this world." ⁵⁴

At the Stockholm Conference there was a lot of concern expressed by both the developed and the developing countries for the total disregard of the environment by all the countries. For the first time the world became aware of the terrible degradation of the environment which, if it remained unchecked, would lead to the destruction of the whole world. Everybody agreed that protection and improvement of human environment was "a major issue", needed "more prudent care", and "through ignorance and indifference", we could "do massive and irreversible harm to earthly environment on which our life and well-being" depended. The Conference pressed for several actions for the protection of our fragile environment and adopted 26 principles recommending various measures to bring man and his activities in harmony with nature. It was also recognized that poverty must be abated and the poor must be helped if the environment had to be saved (see Principles 8 to 12).

It must be stressed, however, that there was little, if any, real communication between the rich and the poor at Stockholm. It was more or less like a dialogue between the deaf, each harping on their own problems without bothering about what the others had to say. The acceptance of the body of principles, which was not an easy task, consisted of a largely unenforceable set of recommendations which were hortatory in nature and could be generally ignored as soon as the delegates reached home.

Environmental Decline and Response

Vast industrial expansion took place in the developed countries after the Second World War without any regard to the environment, resulting in terrible pollution. This was symbolized by the Los Angeles smog, the proclaimed death of Lake Erie; progressive pollution of the Meuse, Elbe and Rhine; and chemical poisoning in several parts of the United States and Europe. But by the late 1960s, growing awareness and public concern led to action by governments and industry in the industrial countries. Expenditures rose as high as 2 per cent of the G.N.P. in some of the industrial countries after the Stockholm Conference by the late 1970s. The results were mixed but with the cooperation of the industry, during the 1970s a number of industrial countries experienced a significant improvement in environmental quality. There was a considerable roll back in air pollution in many cities and in water pollution in many lakes and rivers. Certain chemicals were controlled.

But despite these achievements, the progress was limited and was confined only to a few industrial countries who were willing and could afford to take preventive measures to reduce, control, and prevent air and water pollution. On the whole, however taking the entire biosphere as one unit, the condition was worsening. Fertilizer run-off and sewage discharges into rivers, lakes and coastal waters had increased, with terrible effects on

fishing, drinking water, navigation and scenic beauty.

In the meantime, the poor developing countries were making their own contributions. Engrossed in their own problems, the rich did not have time to look at the miseries of the poor nor, in spite of all their rhetoric, did they have an inclination to help them economically. The result was further deterioration in their economic conditions. While in the industrial countries the population growth had been under 1 per cent and in some countries was approaching zero population growth, in the developing countries it had reached 3.7 billion by 1985 and was likely to grow to 6.8 billion by 2025. 59 But besides this population explosion in the developing countries which neutralized all the economic progress they made, and was ticking like a time bomb, deteriorating terms of trade, rising debt-service obligations, stagnating flows of aid, and growing protectionism in the developed market economies, caused severe external payment problems. These economic difficulties led to devastating social impacts: malnutrition, hunger and droughts, especially in Africa. 60

If Africa had an acute debt problem, in Latin America it reached the level of a crisis. In 1985 their debts constituted roughly two-thirds of outstanding loans of banks to developing countries. Real wages fell and growing poverty and deteriorating environmental conditions were visible

everywhere in Latin America. Latin American natural resources were being used not for development or to raise living standards, but to meet the financial requirements of the industrialized countries.⁶¹

Environmental Crises

Poverty, there is no doubt, was "a major cause and effect of global environmental problems" which were becoming all pervading, threatening life on earth. 62 Each year another 6 million hectares of productive dry land was turning into worthless desert. More than 11 million hectares of forest was being destroyed yearly and turned into low-grade farmland unable to support the farmers who settled it. In Europe, acid precipitation was killing forests and lakes and damaging the architectural heritage of nations. The burning of fossil fuels put into the atmosphere carbon dioxide which was causing gradual global warming. The "greenhouse effect" might in a few years increase average global temperatures to shift agricultural production areas, raise sea-level to flood coastal areas and even drown some island States. According to experts in the field, the consequence of this one dramatic alteration of our environment – not including the thousands of other environmental problems we face – may "stand second only to global nuclear war". It may lead to –

"catastrophic floods and droughts... entire species and regions of plants, forests and animals could be wiped out at rates nearly unprecedented in evolutionary history... the delicate ecological balance of oceanic conditions and biotics could be dramatically upset...; and human mortality could increase catastrophically due to temperature changes and resultant proliferation of disease and malnutrition at rates that would far exceed the speed of scientific advancement and response".

Other industrial gases had already depleted the planet's protective ozone shield threatening increase in the number of human and animal cancers and perhaps disrupting the human food chain. Not only was environmental degradation proceeding at an alarming rate but in the 1980s numerous economic-environmental disasters occurred. Food production per capita declined in 94 countries between 1985 and 1989. The drought-triggered environment crisis in Africa killed more than one million people, threatening another 35 million. In 1984, a leakage in a pesticides factory in Bhopal (India) killed more than 2000 people and blinded and injured over 200,000 more. Liquid gas tanks exploded in Mexico City killing 1000 people and leaving thousands more homeless. In 1986, an accident at a nuclear reactor in Chernobyl, USSR, killed at least 25 people and sent radioactive fallout across Europe which, it was estimated, might cause anywhere from 14000 to 475,000 cancer deaths. 65 Agricultural chemicals, solvents and mercury flowed into the River Rhine during a warehouse fire in Switzerland killing millions of fish and threatening drinking water in Germany and the Netherlands. 66

Meaning of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development, which became the new slogan at the Rio Conference in 1992, means development that lasts. A basic concern is that those who enjoy the fruits of economic development today may be making future generations worse off by excessively degrading the earth's resources and polluting the earth's environment. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development, "sustainable development was meant to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Sustainable development, therefore, implied limits "imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb effects of human activities". Thus, poverty was not inevitable. The Brundtland Commission was convinced that —

"Poverty is not only an evil in itself, but *sustainable development* requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfill their aspiration for a better life. A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes".

Development cannot subsist upon a deteriorating environmental resource base; the environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out of account the costs of environmental destruction".

One thing was certain however, according to the Commission. No country could "develop in isolation from others". Long-term sustainable growth would require, therefore, "far-reaching changes to produce trade, capital and technology flows that are more equitable and better synchronized to environmental imperatives".

'The Human Development Report of 1993 also insists that it is as important to address the "silent emergencies" of poverty like water pollution, land degradation and environmental diseases, as it is to focus on "loud emergencies" like global warming and ozone depletion, that usually dominate the headlines. While the old motive of fighting the cold war is dead, the new motive must be the war against global poverty because — "this is an investment not only in the development of poor nations but in the security of the rich nations. The real threat in the next few decades is that global poverty will begin to travel, without a passport, in many unpleasant forms; drugs, diseases, terrorism, migrations. Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere". "

Rio Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1992

The Stockholm Conference had raised public awareness about our ailing planet. The Rio Summit extended this interest worldwide as television and radio carried the message to every corner of the earth. The Stockholm

Conference was attended by two heads of government, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme. The Earth Summit at Rio drew more than 100 heads of State and government. Both the seriousness of global environmental problems and general awareness about them increased dramatically, it was correctly noticed, as did "the level of human suffering due to related poverty". During two decades between Stockholm and Rio, the population on our crowded planet rose from 3.5 billion to 5.5 billion, 95 per cent of it in poor countries; the earth lost 500 million acres of trees; for the growth of food crops, the world lost 500 million tons of topsoil, an amount equal to the tillable soil of India and France combined; food production declined in 94 countries between 1985 and 1989;

Clearly, it was pointed out, the South was still subsidizing the high standard of living in the North. Canada's Minister of Environment, Jean Charest, reminded delegates at Rio that in the past "thirty years, income disparities between the North and the South have grown from twenty times to sixty times" and commented that "this trend is simply not sustainable". The North with 25 per cent of the world population, still consumed 70 per cent of the world's energy, 75 per cent of its metals, 85 per cent of its

wood.⁷⁹ India's former Minister of Environment, Maneka Gandhi, pointed out at Rio that one Western child consumed as much as 125 Eastern children did. She concluded that "nearly all environmental degradation in the East is due to consumption in the West".⁸⁰

Rio Conference Adopts Various Instruments

To correct some of these imbalances, to coordinate actions of all States, rich and poor, on various fronts with a view to "establish a new and equitable global partnership", and to cooperate in the achievement of sustainable development for everyone, which had become absolutely essential if the Earth, our only home, had to be saved from the impending, catastrophe, the Rio Conference adopted various instruments trying to elaborate and prescribe general rights and obligations "to meet developmental and environmental needs of the present and future generations". ⁸³ Besides a general Rio Declaration on Environment and Development proclaiming 27 principles for "the further development of international law in the field of sustainable development" (Principle 27), UNCED adopted a Convention on Climate Change, Convention on Biological Diversity, a Statement of Principles on Forests, and Agenda 21, which was more or less a Charter of demands by the developing countries. Agenda 21 became the main forum for North-South wrangling on every

imaginable topic, including the spread of deserts, disposal of toxic wastes, and even the protection of women's rights. In the end, all that the delegates could agree was that some of these problems did need to be solved. But what they could not agree was the means to solve them.

Rio Achieves No Progress

If the purpose of the Rio Conference on Environment and Development, attended by more than 100 heads of State and government and thousands of delegates, was to forge a new global partnership between the rich and the poor countries, and to develop a new law of environment and development for the protection of our small planet which is under a serious threat of almost certain doom, it achieved neither. The instruments adopted in Rio were not really binding in law and were couched in such vague and uncertain language that they entailed no legal, political, or even moral obligation. That so much thundering rhetoric accompanied the formulation of declarations never meant to be legally binding both at Stockholm and Rio, merely shows extreme conservativeness, if not insincerity, of the delegates who were more concerned about their "sovereignty" and entrenched "sovereign rights" in a world which is said to have became one (see Principle 2).

The head of the Canadian delegation, Arthur Campeau, described the

final declaration as "a document suitable for bureaucrats". Sometimes generously described as "soft law" and widely acclaimed, it really led nowhere. On the other hand, Agenda 21, described as a "750 page document of unsurpassed U.N. verbosity, intended to be the world's programme for sustainable development", ⁸⁸ is not even likely, according to some observers, "to be read widely or perused by the general public".

Rich-Poor Dichotomy Continues

While the poor countries have been really concerned about their crushing poverty and have continued to compare their miserable lives with the lavish standards in the industrialized countries, the latter have got sick and tired of listening to these comparisons and details of their over-consumption and wastages. Thus the United States, whose consumer society was uppermost in the minds of most poor countries, contemptuously rejected at Rio any condemnation of its affluent way of living. American delegates insisted "over and over that the American life-style is not up for negotiation".

It is all too well-known that the rich countries are not prepared to abandon their privileges. They are more keen to preserve their life styles than to accept disciplines which require a lowering of their irrational levels of consumption of energy, food, paper and a hundred other things. Whatever their leaders say for the record, their deeds speak louder than their words and betray their inability to look at the ecological issues from a global perspective. As we have seen above, the condition of the poor countries – their indebtedness, their terms of trade, their population, their environment – have all deteriorated during the last twenty years. Nationalism still reigns supreme and is the single largest obstacle to international cooperation.

Moreover, as things are, no country, least of all the ones with high-tech weaponary, can be held accountable for disasters which endanger thousands of lives in neighbouring or even remote areas. Russia got away with Chernobyl and dumping nuclear waste in the sea off the coasts of Korea and Japan. France does not feel constrained for having caused many deaths in remote Pacific islands because of radiation which resulted from its repeated nuclear tests despite widespread protests. Many people may be dying because of eating fish from the seas contaminated by toxic wastes without even being able to name the guilty.

It is well-known that the latest GATT negotiations, such as the Uruguay round, were largely conducted between the United States, the European Economic Community and Japan. The latest GATT agreement (sometimes referred to as the Dunkel draft) is essentially a compromise between them, irrespective of the conditions of the poor and the developing

countries. The poor countries are merely dragging along whatever principles might have been recommended at Stockholm and Rio to help them. Thus, though there is a crying need for sharing the world's scientific resources, developing countries have found that access to western technology is neither easy nor cheap.

Progress Towards What and Progress for Whom?

As early as 1908, that great perceptive Indian writer, Rabindranath Tagore, raised some doubts about the so-called "progress" towards which we were being dragged along by the prosperous West, which are as relevant today:

"We have for over a century been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot, choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, and overwhelmed by the speed... If we ever ventured to ask, 'progress towards what and progress for whom', it was considered to be peculiarly and ridiculously Oriental to entertain such doubts about the absoluteness of progress".

As we look at the Western countries and their people continuously struggling to have even more luxurious lives completely disregarding the environmental destruction and progressing towards an uncertain future, and a large number of poor third world countries with their aspiring millions desperately trying to follow them irrespective of the consequences and

getting stuck in the thick mire of even more difficult economic and environmental problems, we, as orientals, have those lingering doubts, progress towards what and progress for whom? We have found no answer to these questions.