

# Action on the Environment:



**the role of  
the United Nations**

## **ACTION ON THE ENVIRONMENT:** **THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

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<b>PROGRAMME Sub -programme</b>	<b>GENERAL OBJECTIVE</b>	<b>IMPLEMENT- ING AGENCIES</b>	<b>UNEP'S ROLE</b>
<b>ATMOSPHERE</b>			
Atmospheric composition, processes and pollution	Mitigate adverse impact of human activities on atmosphere; prevent air pollution.	IAEA, ICSU, UNEP, WHO, WMO.	Monitor atmospheric quality; promote legislation to control emissions resulting from human activities; help parties implement existing legislation.
Climate and climatic change	Upgrade and apply understanding of climate and climatic change.	ECA, FAO, ICSU, IOC, UNEP, Unesco, WMO.	Assess socio-economic implications; promote policies that mitigate, or adapt society to cope with climate change; prepare and promote adoption of appropriate legislation.
<b>WATER</b>			
Water resources and freshwater ecosystems	Integrate environmental considerations into water resources management.	DTCD, ECE, FAO, IAEA, ICSU, IFAD, ILO, UNDP, UNDRRO, UNEP, Unesco, WB, WHO, WMO.	Prepare and promote programmes and action plans for the sound management of inland water resources.
Drinking water supply and sanitation	Provide drinking water supplies and sanitation services to all.	ATRCW, DIESA, DTCD, ECA, ILO, INSTRAW, UNICEF, WB, UNDP, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, WHO, WMO.	Support environmentally sound international efforts to strengthen national capabilities to provide drinking water and sanitation.
<b>TERRESTRIAL ECOSYSTEMS</b>			
Soils	Maintain soil productivity, prevent land and soil degradation and stimulate land and soil reclamation.	ECA, FAO, IAEA, IFAD, UNEP, Unesco, WMO.	Promote the 1982 World Soils Policy action plan; assess soil degradation; help formulate and implement national soils policies; promote sound soils management with training and demonstrations.
Arid lands and desertification	Manage arid and semi-arid ecosystems for sustainable productivity, prevent desertification and reclaim desertified land for productive use.	DTCD, ESCWA, FAO, IFAD, ILO, UNDP, UNDRRO, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, UNSO, WB, WFP, WMO.	Encourage use of existing desertification control knowledge and aid programmes to that end, concentrating on worst affected areas; help set up national action plans.
Tropical forest and woodland ecosystems	Sustainably develop tropical forest and woodland ecosystems.	ECA, FAO, IFAD, ILO, IUCN, UNCTAD, UNEP, Unesco-MAB, UNU, WMO.	Support monitoring and assessment of forests and promote their environmentally sound management; encourage the protection of substantial areas; help upgrade national institutions responsible for forest management.
Temperate and cold zone ecosystems	Manage land and maintain/restore environmental quality in temperate eco-systems so as to stabilize local populations.	ECE, FAO, UNEP, Unesco, WMO.	Help: assess the impact of pollutants in temperate and cold zone regions; draw up and implement appropriate agreements for their sound management.
Mountain and highland ecosystems	Manage mountain and highland ecosystems so as to stabilize local populations.	FAO, UNEP, Unesco, WWF.	Help: assess environmental changes in mountain areas; set up sub-regional management systems in the Andes, Himalayas and Africa; encourage information exchange/management training.
Biological diversity and protected areas	Protect peoples natural heritage through conservation of ecosystems and diversity of plants and animals.	FAO, IAEA, UNEP, Unesco, WWF.	Help set up and implement national conservation strategies and appropriate international conventions; conserve ecosystems and wild animals and plants in selected representative areas of the worlds biogeographic provinces; promote genetic resource conservation and development of related national, regional and global information systems; upgrade through training related institutions and professionals.
Microbial resources and related biotechnologies	Maximize benefits and minimize environmental risks of biotechnologies using micro-organisms and other biological agents.	ECE, FAO, IAEA, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, UNU, WHO, WMO.	Upgrade the Microbial Resources Centres Network, the International Microbial Strains Data Network and the World Data Centre on Micro-organisms; help conserve the microbial genetic resources and cell lines; promote use of microbial technologies in environmental management; draw up guidelines for safe use of biotechnologies.
Agricultural lands and agrochemicals	Apply environmentally sound methods to all aspects of agricultural land use, crop and livestock production and post-harvest food loss.	ECA, ESCAP, FAO, IAEA, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, WHO, WMO.	Monitor impact of agrochemicals on environment and human health; demonstrate integrated crop protection and animal production; promote training in integrated pest management and measurement and improvement of plant productivity.
<b>COASTAL &amp; ISLAND SYSTEMS</b>			
	Manage and/or rehabilitate coastal and island systems.	DIESA, DTCD, ECA, ESCAP, FAO, Habitat, IMO, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, UNU, WHO.	see Oceans.
<b>OCEANS</b>			
Regional marine environments	Maintain and enhance the quality of regional marine environments and achieve the sustainable use of the resources.	DTCD, FAO, IAEA, ILO, IOC, IMO, UNEP, Unesco, WHO, WMO.	Coordinate promotion and initial implementation of regional action plans; help promote sound development in related coastal zones; develop regional seas database and regular reports on the state of regional seas and coastal areas; upgrade national capacities to take over running of seas programmes; promote enforcement of regional legal agreements.
Global marine environment	Improve understanding of role of oceans in operation of biogeochemical cycles and processes; monitor ocean pollution and strengthen international cooperation for prevention/control.	FAO, DTCD, IAEA, ILO, IOC, IMO, UNEP, Unesco, UN, UNIDO, WHO, WMO.	Integrate national and regional monitoring and assessment programmes into a global effort; help draw up an integrated global ocean monitoring programme; help set up a data processing mechanism based on GEMS.
Living marine resources	Conserve and provide for the sustainable use of living marine resources and their habitats.	FAO, IOC, UNEP, Unesco.	Assist international efforts to conserve, manage and use sustainably marine living resources emphasising the global marine mammals action plan, the management of other living marine resources through the management of ecosystems, assessing the environmental impacts of coastal and marine development, particularly aquaculture, on living marine resources.
<b>LITHOSPHERE</b>			
	Achieve the environmentally sound use of the resources of the lithosphere; mitigate effects of natural/induced disasters of geophysically/geological origin.	DIESA, DTCD, ECA, IAEA, UNDRRO, UNEP, Unesco, WMO.	Promote consideration of geological, hydrogeological, geophysical factors in land-use planning/construction; use established guidelines to demonstrate environmentally sound exploitation of minerals; support study of interaction between key biogeochemical cycles; promote policies that regulate activities involving human interaction with the various biogeochemical cycles.

PROGRAMME Sub-programme	GENERAL OBJECTIVE	IMPLEMENTING AGENCIES	UNEP'S ROLE
<b>HUMAN SETTLEMENTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT</b>			
Human settlements planning and management	Integrate environmental considerations into all aspects of human settlements planning and management.	ECA, Habitat, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, WB, WHO.	Help assess environmental conditions in human settlements; apply the guidelines for planning and managing human settlements in selected countries; encourage research, training and information exchange on environmentally sound human settlements planning and management.
Community preparedness for natural and man-made disasters	Prevent and mitigate effects of natural disasters on communities; strengthen the preparedness of communities to cope with them.	ECA, ECE, Habitat, ILO, IOC, UNDP, UNDR0, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, WB, WMO.	Promote the adoption of environmentally based measures to further develop community preparedness.
<b>HUMAN HEALTH AND WELFARE</b>			
Hazards of pollution	Reduce hazards of environmental pollution to acceptable levels.	DIESA, ECE, FAO, IAEA, IARC, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, UNIDO, UNSCEAR, WHO.	Assess and evaluate the potential health and environment hazards of selected pollutants; disseminate information; upgrade national capacities to assess, prevent, control pollution hazards.
Environmental aspects of communicable diseases	Prevent and reduce sickness/deaths caused by communicable diseases.	FAO, UNEP, WHO.	Help facilitate studies on the epidemiological surveillance of communicable diseases and the biology, ecology and behaviour of disease vectors; demonstrate ecologically sound methods for disease vector control; prepare guidelines and manuals; promote education, training and transfer of knowledge; upgrade national capabilities for the environmental management of disease-causing agents, particularly mycotoxins and zoonoses.
The working environment	Improve the quality of working environment to prevent occupational accidents and diseases.	IAEA, ILO, UNIDO, WHO, WMO.	see Industry and the Environment
<b>ENERGY, INDUSTRY AND TRANSPORTATION</b>			
Energy and environment	Develop sustainable energy systems; mitigate existing and prevent future adverse environmental effects.	DIESA, ECE, FAO, IAEA, ILO, UNDR0, UNDP, UNEP, UNIDO, UNU, WB, WHO, WMO.	Help develop methodologies and guidelines for environmentally sound national energy policies; disseminate information on the environmental impacts and risks of different energy systems and guidelines for their comparative assessment and management; help demonstrate that energy can be provided and used in environmentally sound ways.
Industry and environment	Achieve environmentally sound industrial development	ECA, ESCAP, ECE, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, UNIDO, WB, WHO.	Foster discussions between governments, industry, international institutions, trade and workers organizations, employees and the public on the environmental management of industry; prepare technical publications on environmental management in the industrial sectors of most importance to developing countries; promote the existing guidelines; increase information flow; provide technical assistance, training etc.
Transportation	Reduce detrimental impact of transportation to acceptable levels.	DIESA, ECE, FAO, Habitat, IAEA, ICAO, ILO, IMO, IOC, UN, UNDP, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, WB, WMO, WHO.	Prepare guidelines for national and regional transportation plans, including environmental impact assessment; spread information on transportation systems effects on human health and the environment.
<b>PEACE, SECURITY AND ENVIRONMENT</b>			
	Reverse the build-up of armaments and reduce the intensity, frequency and likelihood of military activity.	DPSCA, DTCD, FAO, PRIO, UNEP, UNSCEAR, UNITAR, WMO.	Prepare studies on the environmental consequences and impacts of regional or local conflicts; spread information on the impact of the arms race on the environment and the impact of environmental deterioration on security.
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT</b>			
Scientific and technical environmental information	Accumulate scientific and technical environmental information; make it readily available to decision-makers etc.	DIESA, FAO, Habitat, IAEA, ILO, IMO, IOC, UN, UNDP, UNEP, Unesco, UNIDO, WB, WHO, WMO.	Further develop existing environmental data network for use in environmental assessments (GEMS/GRID). Increase information flow on toxic chemicals particularly in international trade; help develop an export notification scheme for banned and severely restricted chemicals; promote international legal instruments on information exchange on chemicals and control of transfrontier movements of hazardous wastes (IRPTC). Upgrade capacities for the provision of substantive information on important environmental issues and promote the establishment of national environmental information systems (INFOTERRA).
Monitoring and environmental data/assessment	Provide assessments of environmental issues using socio-economic and environmental data.	UN system.	Coordinate monitoring, data management and the preparation of assessments of selected environmental problems (water pollution, forests, soil loss, selected chemicals and climatic changes) for environmental management purposes; produce global state of the environment reports; help developing countries prepare national state of the environment reports.
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT MEASURES</b>			
Environmental aspects of development planning and cooperation	Integrate environmental considerations into economic/social development policies, programmes, projects.	DIESA, DTCD, ECE, FAO, IFAD, ILO, IMF, UNCTAD, UNCTC, UNDP, UNFPA, UNEP, Unesco,	Emphasising environmental impact assessment, social cost benefit analysis, integrated physical planning and environmental accounting, promote improved development planning; train decision-makers and administrators; upgrade developing country institutions; encourage information exchange.
Environmental law and institutions	Enact and enforce national and international environmental law.	UNIDO, UNITAR, UNU, WB, WFC, WFP.	Develop international legal instruments; compile information on international and national law; help developing countries enact environment legislation, upgrade administrative machinery.
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS</b>			
Environmental education and training	Mobilize human resources for environmental protection through education and training.	ILO, UNEP, Unesco, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNU, WHO.	Promote: general environmental education; incorporation of environmental education in general university education and adult training courses; environmental management training.
Public information	Increase public awareness so as to influence policies and action in support of sustainable development and environmental quality.	ESCAP, UNEP.	Feed specific constituencies with relevant environmental information; develop an environmental book trade and audio-visual productions; increase contact with media; exploit the public relations potential of successful UNEP initiatives.

# Abbreviations

<b>ATRCW</b>	African Training and Research Centre for Women
<b>DIESA</b>	Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations
<b>DPSCA</b>	Department of Political and Security Council Affairs, United Nations
<b>DTCD</b>	Department of Technical Cooperation for Development, United Nations
<b>ECA</b>	Economic Commission for Africa
<b>ECE</b>	Economic Commission for Europe
<b>ESCAP</b>	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>GEMS</b>	Global Environmental Monitoring Scheme
<b>Habitat</b>	United Nations Centre for Human Settlements
<b>IAEA</b>	International Atomic Energy Agency
<b>ICAO</b>	International Civil Aviation Organization
<b>ICEL</b>	International Council on Environmental Law
<b>ICSU</b>	International Council of Scientific Unions
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>IIED</b>	International Institute for Environment and Development
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IMO</b>	International Maritime Organization
<b>INSTRAW</b>	United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
<b>IOC</b>	Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission
<b>IUCN</b>	International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
<b>MAB</b>	Man and the Biosphere Programme
<b>PRIO</b>	International Peace Research Institute - Oslo
<b>SWMTEP</b>	System-Wide Medium Term Environmental Plan
<b>UNCTAD</b>	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<b>UNCTC</b>	United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNDRO</b>	Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>Unesco</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNIDO</b>	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
<b>UNITAR</b>	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
<b>UNSCEAR</b>	United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation
<b>UNU</b>	United Nations University
<b>WB</b>	The World Bank
<b>WFC</b>	World Food Council
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WIPO</b>	World Intellectual Property Organization
<b>WMO</b>	World Meteorological Organization
<b>WWF</b>	World-wide Fund for Nature

**This guide to the UN System-Wide, Medium-term, Environment Programme, 1990-1995 (SWMTEP) is a result of cooperation between the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) - the former a UN secretariat, the latter a non-governmental policy research institute.**

**As people learn more and become more concerned about environmental threats to their lives and livelihoods - the warming of the atmosphere and sea level rise, the depletion of the protective ozone layer, the destruction of forests and other productive land - they naturally want to know what the planet's main global organisation, the UN system, is doing about these dangers.**

**This pamphlet is meant to explain briefly how the UN system operates as regards the environment, and to put those operations into perspective in terms of the rapidly changing perceptions of what 'environmental action' really means. It also describes the workings of SWMTEP, but the intricate strategies under the many headings of the SWMTEP II document make comprehensive treatment impossible.**

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# I. Changing perceptions

## 1. THE HARD REALITIES

The United Nations neither owns nor controls any of the world's environment. It is a loose confederation under which governments have agreed to co-operate to varying degrees on varying issues. It is run by governments; it is not in itself a government. These often forgotten facts help to explain the peculiar and indirect ways by which the global UN system relates to the global environmental system.

Most of the world's major environmental problems are caused by patterns within the very fabric of national political, economic and social life. It is hard enough for governments to get at the root causes of such problems; it is even more difficult for the UN system, which can only reflect the priorities of those governments. Getting at the causes of many forms of environmental deterioration will require major revolutions in the ways in which people think, act, govern themselves and relate to other governments. For instance:

### \* Nation states

The world is divided into nation states, the structures and modes of operations of which were established in the larger world of previous centuries, before pollution became international and before the advent of a tightly-knit international economy. Today, carbon dioxide released in one nation can change the climate of another nation. Other chemicals released into the atmosphere or water systems can damage both human health and economic development across borders. All these dangers make nations dependent upon one another for environmental security. Coping with these threats effectively will require an admission of that inter-dependence and a diminution, however slight, of national sovereignty. This is already happening in such inter-

national agreements as conventions on acid precipitation and protection of the ozone layer.

### \* Citizen participation

Many environmental resources - topsoil, water systems, forests, plant and animal species - are under the de facto control not of governments but of corporations or individuals. Some systems of government deny many individuals the economic or political power to use these resources rationally. Often they are forced to over-use and degrade them to survive. This may be especially true for people in the more fragile and marginal environments, such as tropical forests and drylands. It is to ensure that governments and corporations respond to the needs of individuals that the final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) listed as the first pre-requisite of sustainable development, "a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making". Most political systems fall far short of this ideal.

### \* International economic system

Most of the world's poor nations are agricultural nations. Due to the nature of the international market-place, many of them will have difficulty developing economically by exporting their agricultural goods. They may face harsh competition from other developing nations producing the same products. They may face trade barriers of various types, or policies which discourage them from adding value to these products by processing in their own countries. In an attempt to develop, such nations may over-use their environmental resources, and must eventually pay the cost of this loss of resources. The WCED report concluded that the economic inequality between nations "is the planet's main 'environmental' problem; it is also its main 'development' problem".

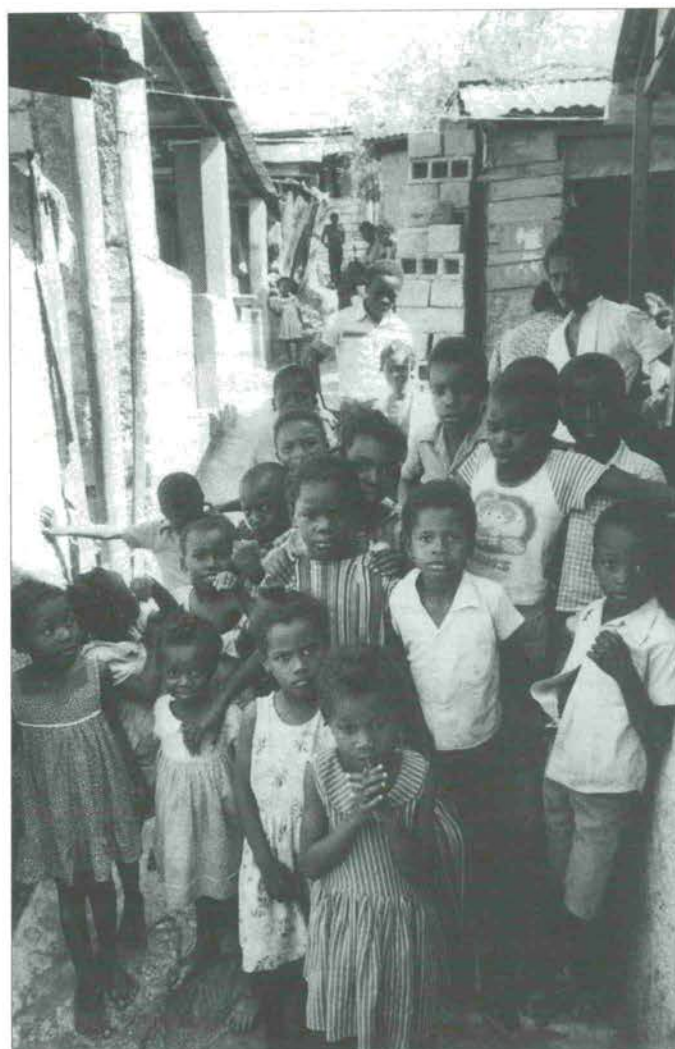
### \* Economic analyses

The practice of economics does not offer effective means of valuing resources which are not traded in the market-place, nor of valuing services over long periods of time. Environmental goods and services are not usually bought and sold, and thus their value cannot be easily measured in monetary terms. It is easy to compute the monetary worth of felled timber; it is harder to compute the value of a standing forest in terms of protecting watersheds and genetic resources, ensuring stable weather patterns, or sustaining the livelihoods of forest people. Also, planners in money-based economies tend to 'discount' future values unrealistically. This can lead to the perverse result that, when long-term decisions are made, any future environmental good will be seen to have no value at all. Common sense says it will have as much value in the future as it does in the present; economics says it does not. As long as political, social and economic systems encourage the short-term over-use of environmental resources for short-term rewards, then the world will continue to squander the resources upon which sustainable development depends.

### \* Population growth

Rapid population growth, combined with poverty, insufficient resources of production and inequitable access to resources plays a role in most environmental degradation. People are the 'problem', and of course people are also the solution. But ensuring that the majorities in most poor nations help rather than impede the development process, and enhance rather than degrade the natural resource base, will require major policy changes by governments as regards their populations and by richer nations towards poorer nations.

Given that the causes of environmental degradation are so deeply embedded in well-entrenched systems of human activi-



HAITI: People are the 'problem' and of course people are the solution

Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

ties, it is hardly surprising that most political leaders and commentators have been more comfortable focusing on the effects of such degradation, rather than the causes. They have emphasised the areas of forest loss, the rates of species extinction, the levels of pollutants in air and water, and so forth. There has been less emphasis on the reasons behind these symptoms of mismanagement. They have also found it easier and more politically expedient - though often far more expensive - to attempt to clean up after the damage has been done rather than prevent the damage in the first place. For prevention requires getting at the roots of the problems.

All of this is changing. These changes are reflected in events occurring both inside and outside the UN system.



## 2. ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT: A RENAISSANCE?

In the 1980s, many people and organisations have radically changed their perceptions of the relationships between the thing loosely referred to as 'the Environment' and the activities loosely referred to as 'Development'. These changes have been spurred by increasing awareness that human activities can alter and are already altering global environmental systems for the worse. This realisation is matched by an equally widespread belief that today we possess the technical means to halt the damage and to conserve and even enhance natural systems.

Many now place more emphasis on the fact that environmental degradation damages the development process than on the fact that development can degrade the environment. At its worst, environmental degradation can make development all but impossible - in both the industrialised and developing nations. The North will not sustain economic development if it suffers the worst-case effects of acid precipitation, global warming, ozone depletion, pollution of aquifers and the predicted shortages of usable freshwater. The South will not develop soundly if it suffers its share of the above effects, while at the same time it loses large portions of its productive land, now under crops and forests, through over-use and misuse.

This new perception is encouraging policy-makers to reconsider the methods devised in the late 1960s and early 1970s for coping with environmental problems. These coping mechanisms largely centred on treating 'the Environment' as a separate sector of human activities, like industry, agriculture and health. Governments established environment ministries and agencies. These often under-funded and under-staffed bodies were expected to somehow solve problems caused by

more powerful and pervasive sectors: for instance, pollution from industry, transport and energy production, and pollution and land degradation caused by farming practices. This approach had some success where effective environmental agencies were backed up by concerned citizens able to participate in national decision-making processes, aided by free exchange of information. But the success was limited largely to issues of domestic environmental degradation; the present global problems frustrate the efforts of national environmental agencies acting on their own.

Today there is broad agreement that 'the Environment' can no longer be viewed as a separate sector. The environment is where we live and where we act, and it provides the resources that sustain us all. Thus any action is 'environmental action'. Any policy is an environmental policy - whether it relates to energy, industry, commerce or agriculture. Viewed this way, Environment and Development are not two concerns that must be traded off one against another. They are instead inseparable: the warp and weft of the same cloth.

This perception is best summed up in the phrase 'sustainable development', which has rapidly become both a slogan and a goal for organisations concerned with the environment and with development. It is defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development - now better known as the Brundtland Commission after its chairman, Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway - as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Thus the phrase contains within it the requirement for husbanding environmental resources - resources ranging from the life-sustaining, such as topsoil and freshwater, to the recreational and cultural.

Sustainable development cannot be

achieved without getting at the root causes of environmental degradation. This is a hard enough task for governments. It is harder, if not impossible, for the UN system, which cannot be seen to be criticising the practices of the governments which give it its validity, or to be taking the side of one group of member states against another group.

### 3. THE EVIDENCE

Much of the above analysis reflects the judgements of the final report of the Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, which was presented to the UN General Assembly in late 1987. At the same time, as the result of a linked process of deliberations, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) presented a report prepared by its Governing Council following terms laid down by the General Assembly: *Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond*. This is an agenda, specifically directed toward governments, which contains conclusions very similar to those of the Brundtland Report. The General Assembly passed a resolution welcoming *Our Common Future*, and adopted *Environmental Perspective* as a policy framework for national action and international cooperation towards sustainable development.

Most governments have independently welcomed the findings of both documents, and several have set up procedures to incorporate the goal of sustainable development into their policies and practices.

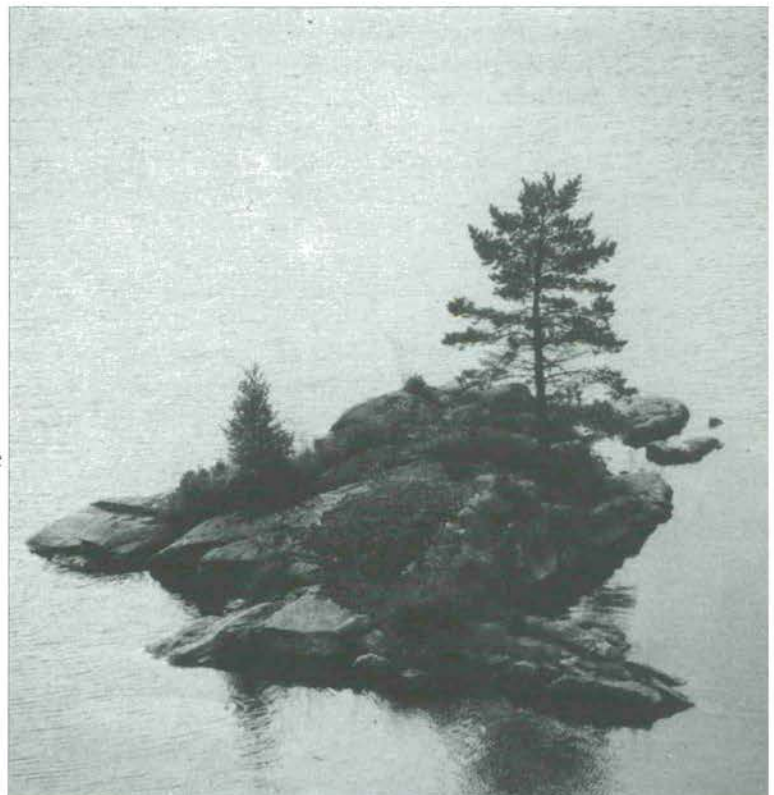
As these reports were being prepared, the World Bank was working to make environmental considerations central to its project preparation work. And it was developing new forms of economic analyses which would put economic theory more in tune with ecological realities.

**'DEAD LAKE' destroyed by acid rain, Sweden**  
Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

Development aid agencies - both national and international - were also striving to base their work more on environmental realities and upon the human livelihoods set in those realities.

Both the Brundtland report and the *Environmental Perspective* called upon governments to emphasise a global view and multilateral concerns. This call coincides with a growing number of international meetings and agreements on trans-boundary pollution. For example, 62 governments and the EEC agreed a protocol on the protection of the ozone layer in Montreal in September, 1987. European governments have been negotiating agreements on trans-boundary pollution, especially acidifying chemicals, for some years.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been quick to see and respond to the inter-connectedness of environment and development. The goal of sustainable development is uniting under the same banner groups concerned with conservation, development for the poorest, peace and security, and human rights - especially women's rights, children's rights and the rights of minorities.



## 4. THE UN SYSTEM AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A LOOK BACK

The UN was already involved in 'environmental activities' before the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. After and in response to Stockholm, the General Assembly set up several new institutions which are still functional;

- The UNEP Governing Council is a policy-making body composed of representatives of 58 governments.

- The Environment Fund is a source of finance made up by voluntary contributions and used to support the costs of new environmental initiatives undertaken within the UN system.

- The Environment Secretariat serves as a focal point for environmental action and co-ordination within the UN system.

The key point here is that UNEP was not established as a sectoral organisation; it was not a sort of 'UN Ministry for the Environment'; it was not meant to be 'responsible' for the world's environment in the same UN way that FAO is thought to be 'responsible' for the world's agriculture or WHO for the world's health.

UNEP, in fact, is the environment programme for the UN system. Its Secretariat is the secretariat not for world-wide activity but for UN-wide activity. As UNEP itself says: "UNEP was a new departure for the UN system in the early seventies. A David among Goliaths,... it was unique in its co-ordinating and catalytic role. Its creators could have settled for one more executive and funding agency - but they knew that the environment could not be hemmed into a sectoral approach."

In designing the environment programme this way, the UN was ahead of its time and ahead of most governments. It was

attempting to weave environmental considerations into the work of every UN body and then to help those bodies co-ordinate the practical work growing out of those considerations. Much of this co-ordination work is carried out by the senior-level working committee representing all UN organisations which have an interest in the environment, known as the Designated Officials for Environmental Matters (DOEM).

Of course, UNEP has not functioned exactly as planned. UNEP does execute projects and fund projects. Its Nairobi-based secretariat, which is only one part of the UN's environment programme, has itself come to be known as 'UNEP'. (There would perhaps be less confusion about its function if it were known as UNES - the UN Environment Secretariat.) UNEP Executive Director Mostafa Tolba complained in a speech to the Governing Council in 1988 that "in the past, far too much attention has been given to the environment secretariat. Thus most members of the UN system perceive the Governing Council as the governing body of the Environment Secretariat". It is that, but the Governing Council should actually be providing leadership on environmental issues throughout the entire UN system, and the other UN agencies should give greater consideration to UNEP Governing Council decisions in planning their own work. It is not surprising that this has not been the case, since many of the specialised UN agencies, like the governments that direct them, still see environmental considerations as something 'outside' of their normal activities.

This view may be changing. The UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), aimed largely at small farmers, is already including an environmental component in all of its projects. The World Bank's efforts have been mentioned. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have been going

through major policy changes to make environmental realities more central to their programmes. The FAO has also begun a review of its projects to ascertain their environmental sustainability.

## **5. THE 'SYSTEM-WIDE' PROGRAMME**

Thus while the United Nations cannot set policies for governments, it is well-placed to set examples for them by weaving environmental and sustainable development considerations into the work of all UN agencies.

UNEP is central to this effort due to its various roles as monitor of the environment, collector and repository of environmental data, training centre, catalyst, and switchboard for the exchange of information. With this in mind, the Brundtland Commission recommended that "UNEP's catalytic and co-ordinating role in the UN system can and should be reinforced and extended".

One of the main ways by which UNEP attempts to co-ordinate the sustainable development work of the United Nations is through the System-wide Medium-term Environment Programme (SWMTEP).

The 'system' referred to is the UN system, and the 'medium term' is the six years over which each programme operates. These programmes are steps toward the longer-term goals laid out in such documents as the WCED report and UNEP's Environmental Perspective. The first SWMTEP was agreed in 1982 to cover the years 1984-89. The more recent SWMTEP II, covering the years 1990-1995, was agreed by the Governing Council of UNEP in 1988 after lengthy consultations throughout the UN system. UNEP officials involved in these consultations found the other agencies much more

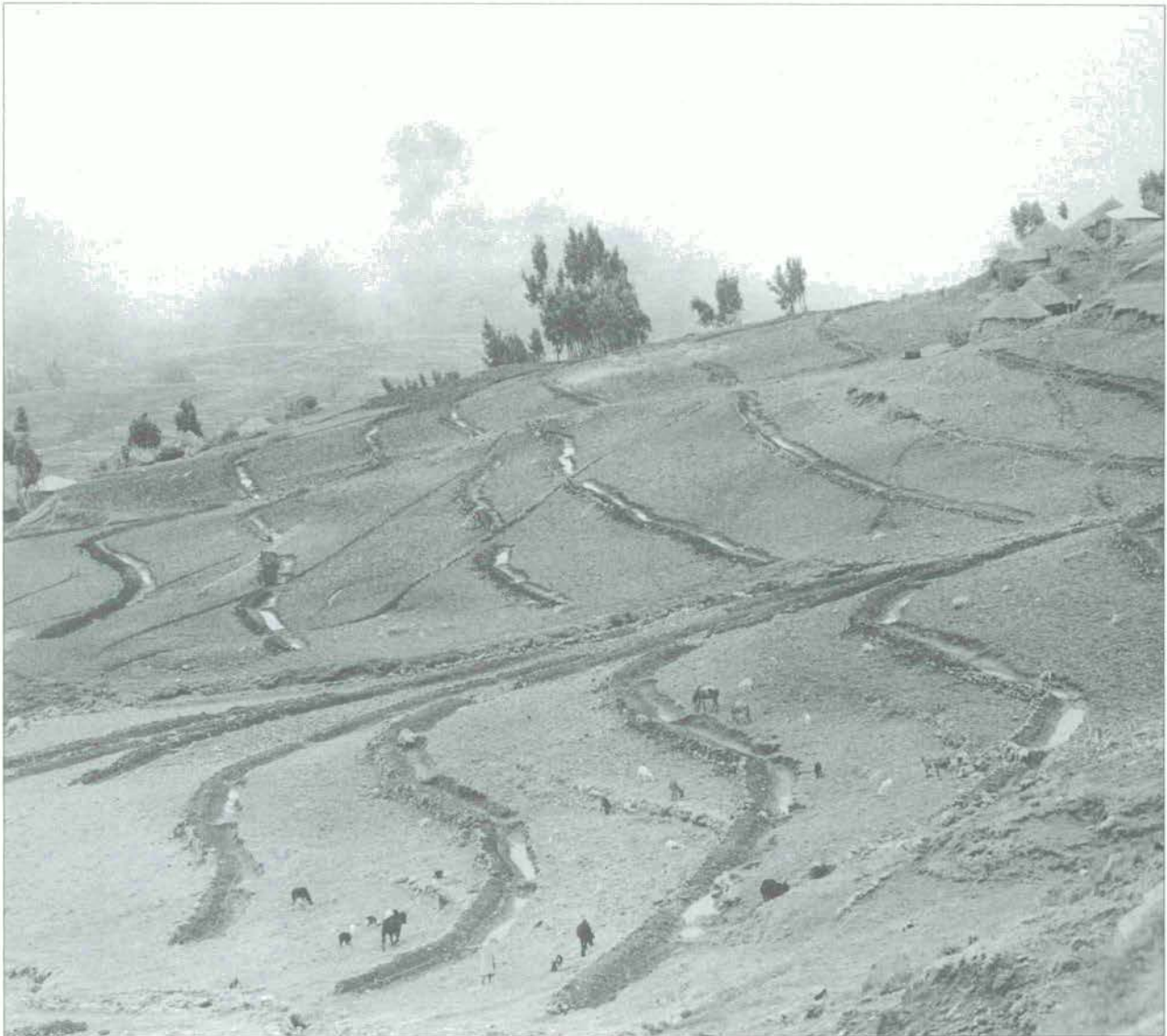
open to the medium-term environment programme than in the past.

The United Nations can help governments to set beneficial policies through its abilities to monitor and report on world-wide developments; to train people to respond to these developments; to co-ordinate efforts to cope with and steer developments, and to help in the co-ordinated formulation of international law. Thus, much of the system-wide environmental programme of the UN is based on those four types of activities.

What follows is a sampler of SWMTEP II. Those interested in the complete programme should request from the United Nations the 103-page document, *The United Nations System-Wide Medium-term Environment Programme: 1990-1990*, Nairobi, 1988 (UNEP/GCSS.1/7/Add.1)

SWMTEP II reflects the somewhat illogical, multi-directional approach institutions are forced to use in dealing with the environment and environmental issues. For while it would clearly be best to deal primarily with the causes of degradation, there are also the myriad effects of that degradation which must be cleaned up. SWMTEP II explains itself thus:

"The sectoral approach itself is not logically consistent, but it is practical as it reflects the way in which issues tend to arise in peoples' minds. Sometimes people become concerned about ecosystems, such as tropical forests or arid lands, sometimes about ecosystem components, such as soils or marine mammals, and sometimes about human activities, such as industry or agriculture, or their effects such as pollution or erosion. Most often, environmental actions are initially conceived to deal with these same issues, but, increasingly, they are being planned in an integrated manner in accordance with broad policies, such as those for population, energy, trade, etc, that have cross-sectoral effects and get



Ethiopia: terraces holding water after rain

Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

to the root of the issue.”

In other words, while our world is one interconnected system, our approach to it is divided into narrow, illogical compartments. But we are getting better.

While this is the programme of the UN system, it gives specific tasks to cooperating non-governmental organisations. It welcomes the involvement of any interested NGO, this term indicating not only private volunteer organisations, but also ‘non-governmental’ groups from industry, business, unions, and employers.

However, “in most cases it is the actions

of national governments that will be decisive; the role of the United Nations system will be mainly to advise, encourage and assist, although in respect of global problems United Nations action will be particularly important....”

“The environment challenge may be the most difficult and the most critical that the people of the world have ever faced. The main purpose of the system-wide programme is to provide the conceptual framework within which all the elements of the United Nations can respond in a concerted fashion to the challenge to promote ecological security.”

# II. The Human Environment

## 1. ATMOSPHERE AND CLIMATE

**The Problem:** The composition and workings of the atmosphere are being changed as human activities release into it various pollutants, ranging from the particles and harmful compounds of local city pollution which affect human health, to acid compounds, to the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other industrial gases thought to be depleting the stratospheric ozone layer. Carbon dioxide, much of it released by the burning of fossil fuels, methane from agriculture, CFCs and other 'greenhouse gases' are warming the globe and could raise sea levels dangerously within the first half of the next century. Food production and the availability of water and energy are all highly sensitive to variations in climate.

**The Strategy:** The basic UN strategy as regards the atmosphere is "based on the need to monitor and assess the impact of atmospheric emissions resulting from human activity and to learn how to manage their detrimental effects". With climate there is a need to develop a more complete understanding of its basic workings, and then to apply that understanding to human activities.

## 2. SOILS AND DESERTIFICATION

**The Problem:** Land is one of the primary resource bases for sustainable development, and soil management is an integral part of the management of all terrestrial ecosystems. In many nations, particularly in Africa, the capacity of the land to support rapidly growing populations is being reduced by soil degradation and

loss at an unprecedented rate and scale. Every year some six million hectares of once productive land are reduced to desert-like conditions, and 21 million hectares become economically unproductive. Such soil loss and damage reflect inadequate land-use policies and ineffective implementation of soil management and conservation programmes. In many countries present traditional systems of rural production overexploit soil and vegetation cover, while other natural resources are hardly used as inputs for rural production (water, mineral and energy resources.)

**The Strategy:** The general UN objectives are to maintain soil productivity, prevent



Watering seedlings in village tree nursery, India

John Ogle/Oxfam

land and soil degradation, and stimulate land and soil reclamation. The overall UN strategy as regards drylands and desertification is based on the 1977 Plan of Action to Combat Desertification. The plan is co-ordinated by UNEP, which will continue to mobilise the support of all international organizations concerned. As regards soils in general, the strategy is based on the World Soils Policy and World Soil Charter, adopted in 1982, which aid the co-ordination of national and international activities relating to soil

use. Governments are helped in preparing and implementing national soil policies and integrating these into other resource management and development strategies. Many nations first need to know more about the state of their soils and the rates and types of soil degradation, and to devise economically feasible, socially acceptable, concrete programmes to reduce the destructive character of many rural production systems.

### 3. FRESHWATER

**The Problem:** Freshwater in rivers, lakes, wetlands and groundwater sustains terrestrial ecosystems. With increasing populations and increasing demand, the need for a regular supply of water is growing rapidly, as is the need for a clearer understanding of its 'renewability' and its complex roles in ecosystems. But the indirect effects of water management schemes are not always fully considered in their planning stages. Projects designed for only one or two purposes - power, irrigation, flood control - may also bring siltation, loss of water by evaporation, shoreline erosion, loss of fisheries, spread of waterborne diseases, and salinisation and waterlogging due to irrigation. In many countries the pressing needs for water, often for a variety of conflicting uses, continue to be met in an uncoordinated manner. Planning processes still fail to link water management, management of terrestrial ecosystems as a whole, and national development programmes.

**The Strategy:** The UN's general objective is to integrate environmental considerations with the development and management of water resources. The Mar del Plata Action Plan of the UN Water Conference in 1977 provides the overall framework for action, and the overall responsibility for co-ordination remains with the Intersecretariat Group for Water Resources. The Steering Committee for

Cooperative Action coordinates action on the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990). The Operational Hydrology Programme of WMO will be further developed and the fourth phase of the International Hydrological Programme implemented by UNESCO. UNEP focuses on the sustainable development of freshwater systems through the 'environmentally sound management of inland waters' (EMINWA) programme.

### 4. TROPICAL FORESTS

**The Problem:** The tropics contain about one-third of the world's forests - complex and fragile ecosystems which are the planet's largest reservoir of genetic resources. Forests in general have a great effect on local climate, and an important but still poorly understood effect on world climate. They protect watersheds, regulate water resources, and are a major source of high quality timber and fuelwood, as well as various foods, drugs, oils, waxes, fibres and other products, many important in international trade. Tropical forests are being destroyed and degraded at an accelerating rate. Some 11 million hectares of natural tropical forest are cleared yearly - 10 times the rate of reforestation. The forests are cut to make room for shifting cultivation by landless farmers, to provide land for what is claimed to be permanent agriculture, including cattle ranching, and to provide fuel and timber.

**The Strategy:** The UN strategy's general objective is to achieve the sustainable development of tropical forests, while ensuring that they continue to regulate water and climate, safeguard biological diversity and provide goods and services, particularly to local people. Such man-



Sri Lanka: the tropics hold about one-third of the world's forests

Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

agement is a major interest not only of the countries in which the forests lie, but of the community of nations as a whole. (But it also recognises that nations have full sovereignty over their own forest resources.) It is based on full implementation of the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, through cooperation by the various agencies and with support from donor governments and aid organisations. It concentrates on innovative action at the interface between forestry and agriculture, for the enhancement of both.

## 5. BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

**The Problem:** The conservation of natural ecosystems and the maintenance of biological diversity are closely related to the plight of the tropical forests, where some 10-20 per cent of the world's plant and animal species may become extinct by the year 2000. But the problem also includes wetlands, reefs and other natural ecosystems, and includes varieties and races of species. These are particu-

larly needed to provide the genetic material with which to improve and sustain cultivation and livestock rearing. The well-established scientific and economic cases for conserving this part of humankind's natural heritage are reinforced by growing awareness of its ethical, cultural, psychological and recreational worth. But habitat is protected over only four per cent of the Earth's land area, and the estimated 3,000 protected areas are unevenly situated and inadequately documented. In situ conservation will need to be complemented by effective forms of ex situ conservation such as gene banks managed through international co-operation.

**The Strategy:** The UN strategy is based on concerted efforts to implement the principles expressed in the World Conservation Strategy, the World Charter for Nature and the Action Plan for Biosphere Reserves. Cooperation is maintained with the specialised non-governmental organisations, and coordination among key organisations is actively pursued through the Ecosystem Conservation Group (UNEP, FAO, Unesco and IUCN, in cooperation with WWF and the International Board for Plant Genetic Resources (IBPGR)).

## 6. OCEANS

**The Problem:** The oceans cover 70 per cent of the planet's surface, help regulate its climate and are the media of various biological and geological cycles. They provide renewable resources - food, skins, oils and drugs - and non-renewable resources - oil, gas, and other minerals. The harvest of renewable resources is sustainable only if harvest rates are in tune with reproduction rates. In recent decades, at least 25 important fisheries have been depleted; a number of species



of marine mammals and sea turtles have been over-exploited, and some are in danger of extinction. The harvesting of minerals, especially oil, often pollutes the seas, but then the oceans are the ultimate sink not only for domestic and industrial wastes, but also for soils and minerals which have eroded off the land. Many of these pollutants degrade marine habitats, especially breeding grounds and nurseries of the young marine creatures. (SWMTEP II divides its treatment of the oceans into 'regional marine environments', the 'global marine environment' and 'living marine resources'.)

**The Strategy:** The UN's general objective as regards the global marine environment is to improve understanding of the role of the oceans in the operation of biogeochemical cycles and processes, to accumulate knowledge of trends in and effects of ocean pollution, and to strengthen international cooperation in its prevention and control. The basis of this effort lies in improving and expanding international programmes of open ocean research and monitoring. Methods will be harmonised, procedures for handling scientific data improved, and global assessments prepared. Nations wishing to play an active part in this area will be assisted to do so.

## 7. ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

**The Problem:** SWMTEP II divides envi-



Oxford Street, London: the issue of 'pollution' has broadened considerably from an early focus on urban air

Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

ronmental health into three separate but related areas: hazards of pollution, the environmental aspects of communicable diseases and the working environment. The issue of 'pollution' has broadened considerably from an early focus on urban air and inland waters to include: indoor air polluted by cooking and heating fires; handling of hazardous wastes; chemical accidents and a general increase in the use of chemicals whose effects on humans are not known; pesticide residues in food; ionising radiation accompanying increased nuclear energy production, and noise in the urban environment. Many of the communicable diseases affecting developing countries are caused by environmental conditions. For example, most of the cases of acute diarrhoea, which annually kill about five million children under the age of five in developing countries, are caused by unsafe drinking water and sanitation. Other such diseases include malaria, schistosomiasis, onchocerciasis, and sleeping sickness.

**The Strategy:** In the area of pollution, UN agencies plan to help nations in assessment capability and facilities, legislation, information standards, regulations, institutional structures, manpower, intersectoral co-operation and funds. They will also strengthen existing programmes for assessing pollution hazards, such as the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS), the International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals (IRPTC) and GEMS. On issues related to the environment of the workplace, the UN system, led by ILO, cooperates with governments and workers' and employers' organisations in strengthening national institutions and capacities, in creating a fuller and broader awareness of the issues and in providing information on how all concerned can improve the workplace environment. On communicable diseases, the UN system continues its investigation into methods of disease prevention and control and the exchange of experience in this field.

# III. Human activities & the environment

## 1. ENERGY

**The Problem:** The production, transportation, conversion and use of energy have already caused serious environmental problems. This is true where the main fuel is biomass (wood, charcoal, crop residues), the primary domestic fuel of about half of humanity, and in industrialised nations where over 90 per cent of energy consumption is based on fossil fuels (coal, oil, gas). The environmental impacts of energy systems and many of the technical means to reduce or eliminate their negative impacts are well enough understood to provide a basis for policy actions. But such impacts are generally not well controlled. This is because the adverse effects are not included in the costs of producing the energy; and markets, or other mechanisms contributing to economic decisions, select for the lowest conventional costs. So systems which pollute or degrade the environment are favoured; systems that are more desirable environmentally may be seen as too expensive.

**The Strategy:** The integration of environmental factors with the planning and development of energy systems is a key element of the UN's system-wide programme. The management of all aspects of nuclear energy systems gets special attention, as the potential impacts of nuclear accidents on the environment and human health are considered to be very high. The use of renewable sources of energy is emphasised, in keeping with the recommendations of the UN Conference on Desertification (1977) and the UN Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy (1981). The strategy implies a change from the simple transfer of energy technology - including environment protection technology - to a systems approach to the planning and management of energy production and use. This reflects practical possibilities for energy

conservation and emphasises the need to meet energy demands from local sources on a sustainable and environmentally sound basis.

## 2. INDUSTRY

**The Problem:** The environmental impacts of industry require action on a sector-by-sector basis, across sectors, and at national, regional and often global levels. Much of the knowledge on environmental protection in various industries is not yet widely used, in some cases because of inappropriate national economic policies which give a low priority to combatting environmental pollution. An increasing number of chemicals are produced in a growing number of countries. Industrial accidents happen, and transboundary effects and means of international action are increasingly important. They are not only important in the aftermath of accidents, but in cases where emissions and effluents move routinely across borders with the natural movements of air and water and in food shipments. The transport of hazardous wastes from one country to another for storage or disposal is of growing concern.

**The Strategy:** The overall UN strategy, consistent with the recommendations of the World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (1984), is to promote and provide practical guidance on approaches by which environmental protection will become an integral part of industrial development. Increased attention is given to cross-sectoral considerations such as the socio-economic impacts of an industry (including tourism), industrial accidents, the siting of industry, and the handling and disposal of wastes and their transport across national boundaries. The transfer of information on new technologies focuses on the prevention of

pollution and the promotion and use of clean technologies.

### 3. AGRICULTURE

**The Problem:** Despite large areas of scarcity, agricultural production continues to outpace population growth. However, much of this increase in food production has been achieved through the use of large amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, as well as improved crop varieties which require these chemicals in abundance. Improper and excessive applications of fertilizer can have detrimental effects on soils, water, plants, animals and humans. The problems caused by misuse of pesticides are more complex than those associated with fertilizers, and the long-term effects on man and the environment of many commonly used pesticides are not fully known. Many dangerous pesticides will need to be replaced by safer products; and until that happens, they should be manufactured, distributed and used as carefully as possible. Certain chemicals, categorised as dangerous and unnecessary in industrialised countries, are still thought by other countries to be needed. Indeed, in some countries, government subsidies encourage the over-use of pesticides. However, many developing countries cannot afford enough fertilizers and pesticides. Thus, attempting to produce adequate harvests requires extensive expansion of cultivable land, which destroys forests and other important ecosystems. Farming practices such as using organic fertilizers, mixed cropping, nitrogen fixing plants and recycled organic matter, pest resistant crop varieties, and integrated pest control would help in the affected developing countries and also have a role to play in industrialised countries.

**The Strategy:** The UN's general objective

is to develop and apply environmentally sound methods and strategies for all aspects of agricultural land use, crop and livestock production and post-harvest food loss so as to maintain productivity and minimise the adverse effects of agrochemicals.

### 4. HUMAN SETTLEMENTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

**The Problem:** The rapid, often poorly controlled growth of towns and cities has meant that about one billion people are poorly housed and 100 million completely without shelter. Large parts of urban areas are covered by slums, squatter settlements and unplanned, unorganised developments that impose deplorable living and working conditions on their inhabitants. Cities are not able to manage the enormous amounts of wastes produced, and these foul the air and water. The growing amount of solid waste also poses serious problems in terms of collection, transport and disposal. And the number of urban dwellers continues to double every 10-15 years. Yet even given this rapid growth, a significant proportion of the world population will still be living in rural areas by the year 2000. Rural villages are small, scattered and numerous, and thus difficult to reach with infrastructure and services. It is yet more difficult to provide services for nomadic peoples. As cities grow, more and more people are crowded into areas where they are vulnerable to disasters. Also, there are many areas in which the landscape itself has been made more prone to disasters such as flooding by the clearing of vegetation. Thus the numbers of disaster victims have risen steadily over the past three decades.

**The Strategy:** The UN strategy follows the principles of the global strategy for shelter to the year 2000 and the basic approaches of shelter for all developed by the UN Commission on Human Settle-

ments. The basic objective is to develop and adopt global, regional, and national strategies which include environmental considerations in human settlements planning and management. Most of the activity in the area of disasters focuses on preparing communities for them, and this involves such basic actions as land-use planning and the application of zoning systems reflecting disaster hazards.

## 5. PEACE, SECURITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

**The Problem:** The maintenance of peace and security was a principal aim in the establishment of the United Nations. Military activities are a cause, but can also be an effect, of environmental destruction. Since environmental degradation can be a significant cause of social unrest, political instability and armed conflict, working towards sustainable development can contribute to world peace and security. Today the build-up of supplies of weapons and armaments plays a role in the irrational use and depletion of resources - for example, when military activities take up land or use scientific and engineering skills which might otherwise be used for more

productive purposes. Also, military activities and their remnants directly destroy or degrade environmental resources: long-lasting chemicals are used to destroy crops and forests, ships carrying polluting cargoes are sunk in armed conflict, dams are destroyed, etc. In recent times the non-military threats to the environment have become so acute as to jeopardise the very survival of the human race. Concerns about ecological security or environmental security will require new patterns of co-operation among states that extend beyond the traditional commitments to sovereignty.

**The Strategy:** The key UN objective in this area is to work towards ending or reversing the build-up of armaments and to reduce the intensity, frequency and likelihood of military activity, both hostile and non-hostile. The strategy has two components. First is the accumulation and dissemination of information on the inter-relationships between the arms race (and conflicts in general) and environment and development trends. The second component, to be aided by the first, is the promotion of cooperation in the field of environment as a confidence-building measure. This entails the promotion of appropriate agreements on the use of shared resources and the protection of common environments such as regional seas, river basins, etc.

Vietnam: during military activity long-lasting chemicals are used to destroy crops or forests...

Bruno Barbey/Magnum



# IV. The General Tasks

*Almost all of the UN's system-wide environment programme covered above has dealt with various aspects of assessment, management, information and education. Yet the SWMTEP II also treats these as separate areas to provide a system-wide overview of each category of work.*

## 1. MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

**The Problem:** Assessment precedes and provides the information base for management. Its purpose is to gather information on the state of the environment, to analyse and interpret that information, and to relate it to socio-economic factors so that it may be transformed into appropriate policy and management options. One problem regarding the UN information systems is their number. FAO runs 30 separate information systems and data banks, many of these containing environmental data; Unesco operates 40. Harmonization of these systems is an obvious priority. With monitoring and environmental data, the key problem is to develop appropriate monitoring techniques and to attract the support needed to extend and co-ordinate data-gathering systems and monitoring networks.

**The Strategy:** The strategy as regards the information systems is three-fold: improving access to the UN's systems, making these myriad systems compatible, and helping countries develop their own compatible systems. Coordination of the UN's information systems is facilitated by the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS). As regards monitoring and environmental data, the UN system will move toward more comprehensive monitoring of the environment through multi-media or integrated monitoring. Satellite and space technology will play an increasingly

important role. More long-term international research programmes will be needed, and the UN should be part of them.

## 2. MANAGING

**The Problem:** Environmental management follows environmental assessment. Some of this management is site specific: changing or protecting a given area. But broader measures for environmental management within nations involve controlling human activities by means of laws and regulations, and influencing them by public plans and policies. This includes economic incentives and disincentives and information. Few governments effectively manage their environments. Many countries' capacity to do this is compromised by unequal conditions of trade and onerous burdens of foreign debt. Much work has been done on cost-benefit analysis, environmental accounting and environmental impact assessments. Much remains to be done to take better account of the long-term, non-market values which are characteristic of the environment.

**The Strategy:** The main role of the UN system is to provide support and technical assistance to governments, also to help develop concepts and tools, and stimulate awareness and understanding of needs and possibilities. Emphasis must be shifted from conceptualisation and awareness-building to concrete improvements in policy formulation, planning and decision-making. This will involve training and institution building, especially in developing nations and within the United Nations. Aid agencies, international financial agencies and the specialised agencies will speed up the application of knowledge to 'internalise' environmental considerations in their programmes.



Burkina Faso: measuring level contours to build stone lines and prevent soil erosion

Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

### 3. EDUCATING AND INFORMING

**The Problem:** The creation of environmental awareness is essential for both assessment and management. SWMTEP II divides the issue of awareness into the two related areas of 'Environmental education and training' and 'Public information'. The latter aims at the general public; specific occupational or social groups, in particular decision-makers in industry and government, though particular attention is given to women, who play an important role in agriculture in many developing countries; and scientists and technicians. 'Education' refers to a process of awareness-building and sensitisation, while training refers to a process of imparting technical skills and specialised knowledge to future professionals or those already active in their particular fields. In the field of public information, the main difficulty is the fierce competi-

tion that exists for the attention of readers, listeners and viewers, and the difficulties of co-ordinating the messages and activities of all the different UN agencies disseminating information.

**The Strategy:** The UN's strategy in education and training is based on the premise that environmental problems require cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary solutions. It will be implemented in the framework of the Global Strategy for Environmental Education and Training in the 1990s, developed by the International Congress on Environmental Education and Training held in Moscow in 1987. A World Decade for Environmental Education (1990-99) will be declared by Unesco and UNEP. The strategy on public information centres around greater collaboration among all the UN agencies producing information. Programmes will be clearly related to key policy thrusts, and public awareness of major environmental issues will be emphasised.

# V. Closing the gaps

**There are two kinds of gaps in the SWMTEP process: timing and institutional.**

The first gaps concern the timing of UN programmes and the timing of the publication of SWMTEP II. The entire UN system has its own medium-term programme; so do the separate UN organisations, and then there is SWMTEP itself. At present, these various terms are not fully synchronised. They begin and end at different times. Thus it is difficult to harmonise policy agreements in medium-term plans with the decisions of governing councils and with various budgets. This situation is improving and will continue to do so.



**Prevention: woman constructing 'bund' for water harvesting in Kenya** Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

The other timing gap stems from the fact that the development of SWMTEP II began well before the publication of the Brundtland Report and the Environmental Perspective report of UNEP. SWMTEP II attempts to reflect the key fact that environmental issues are intertwined with development and economic policies and practices, that anticipatory

and preventive policies are required, and that the importance of 'getting at the sources' of environmental degradation must be emphasised. The drafters of SWMTEP II note that if these approaches are not yet fully described in their document, it is due to its early preparation. "Further steps in the direction pointed out by the Perspective and the Commission's report will be taken successively."

SWMTEP II maintains that the SWMTEP exercise is meant to provide a coherent, overall framework and not a rigid prescription for action. Thus it must be able to respond to subsequent changes in perceptions, activities and budgets both inside and outside the United Nations. There should be an early revision of SWMTEP II during the period in which it is in effect: 1990-95. Perhaps a revised SWMTEP II could be considered at the UNEP Governing Council meeting in 1991.

The other gaps concern institutional activities and the perceptions of those institutions from both inside and outside. For example, the Brundtland Commission devoted one-third of its early 'Common Concerns' section to the role of the international economy in global environmental degradation. The UN system has many agencies involved in various ways with the workings of the world economy. Yet these organisations appear to be under-represented in SWMTEP, and the goal of sustainable development does not appear to have enough emphasis in the concerns of these bodies.

The other major need for new priorities is in the relationships among peace, security, environment and development. A major effort of the UN system, including the Security Council and all of its standing committees and ad hoc bodies, is devoted to peace and security. Yet the UN bodies specialising in these issues have been slow to recognise the ways by which environmental degradation plays a part in the increase of tensions leading to social

unrest, political instability and armed conflict. They have been slow to broaden the definition of 'security' to take in some current environmental threats to security which are as real as armed threats: global warming, ozone depletion, desertification, etc. Too much attention is given to the obvious ways by which war and military activities harm the environment. A report by an ad hoc experts' group meeting on expanded concept of international security convened by UNEP in Nairobi in early 1988, commented on the SWMTEP-II document as follows:

**"Of its two major approaches - effects of military activities on the environment and environmental approaches to alleviating military security problems - it is felt that relatively less emphasis should have been placed on the former approach and relatively more on the latter."**

The group went on to recommend that in all UNEP activities on peace, security and the environment: "the ultimate aim should be to achieve international environmental security as a component of a system of comprehensive security".

The final and most serious gap which needs closing is between the 'programme' as it is described in SWMTEP-II and the present realities of the UN system. Reading the SWMTEP documents, either 1984-1989 or 1990-1995, one gets the impression that all UN bodies are actively involved in sustainable development and environmental management, that these are high priorities, and that SWMTEP informs their actions and co-ordinates the actions of the entire UN system.

This is not yet the case.

It is interesting to compare SWMTEP-II to the official UN handbook, Basic Facts about the United Nations, 1987 edition, published by the UN's Department of Public Information. Under its section on 'Protection of the Environment', which

explains how the UN system deals with the environment and the role of UNEP, there is no mention of SWMTEP. Indeed, there appears to be no mention of SWMTEP anywhere in the book. Yet this edition was published five years after the first SWMTEP document.

Organisations which have key roles listed in SWMTEP - FAO, World Bank, UNDP, ILO, IAEA - do not mention the word 'environment' anywhere in the description of their activities and concerns. (This is not an oversight on the part of the handbook's authors, as the book is put together in close collaboration with the various UN bodies and is updated regularly.)

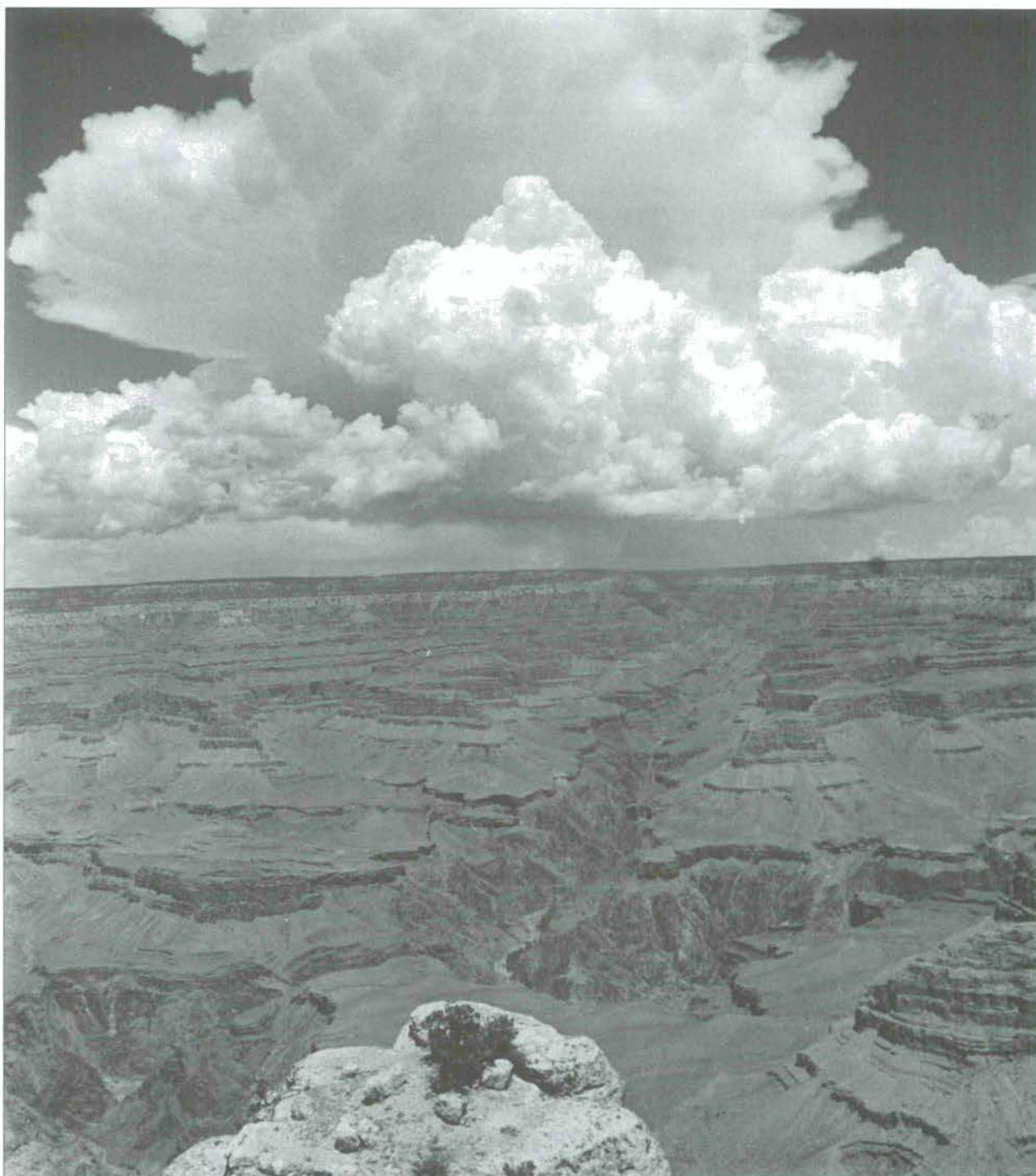
This is not to suggest that these organisations are not involved in activities related to environmental resources. But it does seem that there is much to be done before sustainable development becomes a guiding principle of all UN bodies and before SWMTEP becomes an important force in the UN system. This will only happen if and when governments desire it.

SWMTEP II ends with the same point, noting that:

**"But it [SWMTEP] will be implemented effectively only if Governments collectively support the environment programme by making appropriate decisions in the governing bodies of the United Nations system, activating and expanding global and regional monitoring and information networks and providing funds for agreed programmes of technical assistance and collaborative action."**

Finally, there is a very positive lesson that emerges clearly from reading SWMTEP-II. The UN system already possesses the institutions and infrastructure to deal with virtually every conceivable type of global issue. There is no need





Grand Canyon, USA

Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

for new institutions to achieve sustainable development and ecological security. What is needed is the willingness of all governments to make sustainable development a system-wide UN goal, and then to provide the resources, the cooperation

and the vision to get the job done.

The answer rests with, to use the opening words of the Charter of the United Nations, "We the people of the United Nations..."



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