

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN PRESERVING THE BIO-ENVIRONMENT

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It is understood that Biopolitics are all measures which protect and preserve our environment. Although especially during the last twenty years we have experienced a new stage of environmental awareness, there is nothing new in man defending his rights, his territory and in protecting and preserving his environment.

Seven thousand years ago the Aryans of the Indus Civilisation wrote the Upanishada. The main aim of this book was directed to protect the "five elements". The five elements, which were considered to be vital for life support, are the earth, the water, the energy, the air and the sky.

And what do things look like seven thousand years later?

Well, the days of individual worship of nature are gone, since the modern world is linked in more than one way. Pollution, as well as trade, business, industry and environmental deterioration have become transnational phenomena. And even other elements have to be added to the original five from the Upanishada epos, peace and social justice, which I rate as integral parts of mankind's bio-environment. Although during the last seven thousand years several approaches have been made to ensure mankind's peaceful environment, we can say that almost all of them have failed. Why?

In my view all these attempts were determined to fail because of their one-sided approach. From my own project experience, if you are looking for practical solutions, you always have to keep all aspects of the problem in mind. That is what I call the multidisciplinary comprehensive approach.

The establishment of the United Nations was the first positive step through such a multidisciplinary comprehensive approach. Of course, we all know that the main idea of the founding fathers of the United Nations was to produce an instrument which should bring mankind, if not everlasting, then long-lasting peace. But they were clever enough to see that peace is not only absence from war, but required a just international environment. This thought is very well reflected in the United Nations Charter. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations was the first real international body which took up questions related to our environment on a long-term basis.

We have seen the United Nations develop into a main channel for an increased sense of responsibility in the world. Its purpose is to create a new international order in the way nations and political blocs of nations behave towards each other. This should create a more stable and evenly balanced economic system, and an advancement of under-developed or under-privileged societies to a reasonable level of existence.

From the beginning the specialised agencies of the United Nations kept a close watch on precisely what man was doing to this world: the impact of populations and economic activities in the health of the environment and on life-support resources. Many of the problems were analysed and warning signals were sent out in areas where the rate of damage was clearly beyond the capacity of either man or nature to restore.

Programmes came into existence like the Man and Biosphere Programme conducted by UNESCO. UNESCO-supported local scientific Institutions conducted community groups. Man and Biosphere Programmes are conducted in countries of different stages of development and programmes vary from environment preservation to community education projects.

In response to mounting public concern, the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was convened in June 1972. Delegates from 113 nations met in Stockholm, Sweden. They produced an action plan of 109 separate recommendations. Also a Declaration was made of 26 common principles of man's rights and responsibilities in respect to the global environment. This Stockholm Declaration represents our Magna Carta for our Environment.

Another result of this Conference was the establishment of UNEP, the United Nations Environmental Programme. UNEP was created to protect the human environment by seeking solutions to pollution and man-made contamination. It promotes environmentally sound economic and social development in both urban and rural areas. UNEP serves a catalytic function, working with other UN agencies, governments and non-governmental organisations, and ensures the multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach.

The latest development in this respect is the area often quoted establishment of the UN Commission on Environment and Development in 1982. The task of this Commission is to produce a survey on specific regional needs and necessary co-ordinated action. The report will be discussed at the forthcoming UN General Assembly, and I suggest we all take a very close look at this report, to get new ideas for possible future actions even on the community level.

The mentioning of the community level brings me to the next aspect which I want to draw your attention to, namely the possibilities of the individual to take an active part in the decision making process.

The United Nations is, as we all know, like other similar organisations, an organisation of governments. Individual interests are not recognised in these kind of organisations. In fact it was suggested to rephrase the preamble of the United Nations Charter from "We, the peoples of the United Nations" to "We, the Governments of the United Nations".

We very well know that governments do not always represent the views of individuals living in these states. So, ways and means had to be established to give individuals a voice to be heard by governments. More than a hundred years ago the first of such institutions was established. Today these institutions are well known as international non-governmental organisations. The foundation of League of Nations led to a proliferation of them. The same happened when the United Nations came into being and also during the "Cold War". Today some 900 organisations and institutions maintain regular contacts with the United Nations, many of them with environmental, ecological or biological background.

A remarkable factor of international non-governmental organisations is that up to this day no commonly accepted definition of these institutions exists. The only commonly agreed principle is that in each of these organisations individual or in some cases collective membership was to be possible. A number of scientists from different countries have tried to find a more comprehensive definition but they have never agreed on one. In the framework of UNESCO and the European Council conventions were proposed, attempting to define the character of these institutions, but these conventions never occurred in force, nor were they ever seriously considered.

But this should be seen as a major asset, as one remarkable advantage of these movements. No definition limits the scope of these organisations and no convention tries to streamline the character of NGOs. But they are recognised entities, even in international law, and a number of international treaties mention the existence of NGOs as well as the need to consult them.

The first was the St. Petersburg Telephone Convention at the end of the last century while the most important of these treaties is naturally the Charter of the United Nations and in particular Article 71.

It is clear that all of these organisations, environmental or not, in any way representing the individual, only make sense if mechanisms are established which enable an exchange of views between the governmental and the non-governmental levels and a means to influence and even alter governmental decisions.

Article 71 of the UN Charter lays down the principles of consultation between the UN and the Non-Governmental level. This principle was elaborated in the late sixties in ECOSOC Resolution 1296. This resolution regulates something which is called consultative status. But of course the word consultation implies, that it always depends on the good will of the government level, if the advice of the concerned individuals is to be accepted. There is almost no possibility for the individual to force international governmental organisations to reconsider approaches or to withdraw decisions.

Repeated efforts have been tried in order to balance the input of the NGO level vis-à-vis the governmental level. One of these remarkable suggestions was to amend the UN Charter and to introduce a two chamber system: balancing the General Assembly would be a second chamber consisting of representatives from the NGO level and each decision of the General Assembly would have to pass through this NGO chamber. This is of course an interesting suggestion, but unfortunately totally unrealistic.

There is another possible approach, which in my view offers new perspectives especially for environmental groups on an international basis. I also may humbly say that it is the World Federation of United Nations Association (WFUNA), the organisation I work for, which with other institutions is elaborating and sponsoring this new approach.

We call this new approach the tripartite system.

Now what does that mean? It means that certain projects are conducted by three equally recognised partners: the non-governmental level, the governmental level and the United Nations Secretariat. A project, not necessarily with an environmental background should serve as an example. The task of this project was to discuss new community approaches in the field of drug abuse prevention. The project was substantially prepared and co-ordinated at the NGO level. It was government supported financially and through the local infrastructure, and was implemented within the framework of the United Nations, which also provided parts of the Secretariat. At a concluding conference representatives of NGOs and governments and experts provided by the United Nations met on an equal basis. At this meeting we did not have the usual delegate and observer pattern; everybody was an equally recognised participant of this meeting. And I can tell you that governments in particular were fond of this new way of communication between the governmental and the non-governmental levels.

We are now in the stage of developing this system and I think that it could serve as an ideal platform for discussing bio-environment issues with all parties involved.

Acid rain, water pollution, the ozone layer, are only a few of the problems which affect our environment. The cause-effect relationship is better understood today than before, yet mankind today is more vulnerable because of either individual or collective actions. Headline events - the Sahel Famine, Chernobyl - dramatised how the health of the environment and of man can be threatened. But there is also a collective response from the world community for environmental protection. And though the concern is ages old, what is new is the community approach on a global basis.

And let me conclude with one last remark. The tools to improve our bio-environment already exist. We just have to use them.

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