

# THE BIO-ENVIRONMENT - AN ISSUE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN POLICY

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When the first astronauts circled the Earth in their tiny craft, millions of listeners heard them describe the beauty of this planet, "like a blue pearl in space" and were caught up in a moment of extraordinary human revelation. Since then, much has been written about "Spaceship Earth" on whose finite resources we all depend.

However, the rape of the Earth has been central to the past progress of western industrialisation: the plunder and waste of irreplaceable resources, the poisoning or destruction of fragile ecosystems, the belief that man can mould nature with no need to take account of nature's reactions to such violation.

Too often, projects have been implemented without adequate regard for their ecological consequences, for the health of local residents and workers and for the socio-cultural well-being of the community. The adverse consequences of the development projects often occur because they have not been anticipated in the planning and design facets.

Most ecological problems are still caused by ignorance, poverty, wrong interactions with the natural environment and by the wrong attempts to "modernise" stagnating economies and societies.

Last week a 380-page report was published by the UN-sponsored World Commission on Environment and Development. Drawn up by experts from 21 countries under the chairmanship of Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway, a report was established to consider threats to the environment and world economy posed by rapid population growth and industrial expansion. The report identifies a series of dangers. It would be impossible to refer to all these dangers to the environment but I shall refer to as many as I can within the limits of my speech.

Tropical rain forests are being utilised and exploited to an extent and in a manner which is ecologically and economically intolerable. A joint research project conducted by FAO and UNEP showed that 7.6 million hectares of forests per year are being cut down, a magnitude of 14%, whilst in contrast, reforestation accounts for only about 10% of the areas cleared of timber. According to UNEP estimates the forest reserves in Malaysia and the Philippines could be largely exhausted in about 10 years time. It is estimated in the aforesaid report that in about 3 decades the area of forest destroyed would amount to the size of India.

About 25,000 plant species and more than 1,000 animal species are considered in danger of becoming extinct.

Atmospheric pollution in the big cities has assumed dangerous dimensions. This problem has in recent years affected the big cities of the developing countries. The pollution of the air in Mexico City, Calcutta and Cairo, to name just a few examples, is so severe that smog conditions occur frequently which can be that it is known throughout the world. In contrast to London, where an answer was found relatively quickly once the problem was understood, the cities in the developing countries whose numbers and size are growing continually, will probably not be in a position to guarantee a quick and effective control of industrial emissions, emissions of the rapidly growing number of private vehicles etc. In most developing countries a private vehicle control system (comparable to the German technical inspection association) is completely unknown and there is no environmental supervisory authority for industry and trade.

The growing world population and rising water consumption per capita have in many regions overtaxed the quantitative water resources, involving progressive jeopardisation of water quality, and have increased the spreading of disease through the medium of water.

The report shows that food production increased in the past decade but the growing demand could not be satisfied either quantitatively or qualitatively. The agricultural productivity of the developing countries has increased rapidly in some countries as a result of the "green revolution" but it was accompanied by considerable losses of high yield soil, desert expansion, salinisation and other consequences of inadequate soil management. The increasingly desperate efforts of poorer people to increase agricultural output are damaging the land, perhaps irreparably.

The birth rates in the developing countries have dropped in the past decade but the special concentration of the population has increased rapidly. In the train of this rapid urbanisation, local environmental conditions have deteriorated drastically in many cases: increasing air and water pollution, noise, deplorable sanitary conditions and the like. Inadequate housing conditions lacking infrastructure such as water supply and sewage systems, electricity, health care, schools and other services are characteristic of the situation in the big cities of the developing countries and make them examples of a harmony lacking between ecology and the economy, of unsolved environmental problems.

Another serious and dangerous ecological problem is that of the destruction of the atmosphere's delicate ozone layer which filters harmful ultraviolet rays from the sun. The same chemicals also absorb infrared radiation reflected from the earth, trapping it and gradually raising temperatures near the earth's surface, thus producing what is known in scientific jargon as the "greenhouse effect". This can raise the earth's temperatures with striking effects. These potential dangers are very vividly described in an article in one of the recent issues of "Newsweek" as follows: "The year is 2037 AD Flood warnings have been posted in Paris and Philadelphia, New York City streets are under 4 feet of water and most of the population has fled into the interior. Epidemics of eye cataracts, herpes and hepatitis are reported in Brazil, India and the Mediterranean littoral. For the tenth year in a row, skin cancer cases have increased dramatically to a world total of half a billion. Drought once again decimated wheat production in the American Midwest and the Crimean. Fishermen report that crabs and shrimps have practically disappeared from the world's oceans." The world may look something like this in 50 years from now unless drastic steps are taken soon to protect the global environment.

Very often positive preventive and protecting measures are blocked and obstructed by narrow economic interests and make it difficult for wider agreements to be reached on critical ecological issues. For example, despite the dangers of the emissions of chemicals such as the CFC for the ozone layer, progress towards the direction of restricting the use of such chemicals has been very slow because CFC gases are cheap and non-polluting at ground level and they are used to perform dozens of important functions in manufacturing and in everyday life: they power aerosol cans, they are used in home refrigerators and automobile airconditioners etc. A total immediate ban on CFC would bring about havoc in the chemical industry world-wide.

The report blames CFCs for 90% of observed damage to the ozone layer. However, the economic stakes are very high. Literally thousands of companies rely on cheap efficient chemicals to carry on their own business.

Therefore, it is understandable why no agreement has been reached yet, but recently there has been official recognition by the 27 states who are meeting and trying to work out a formula for controlling the emission or production of some of the most dangerous gases, that concerted action is needed to protect the ozone layer and it is hoped that the negotiations will reach a preliminary accord on 2-3 chemicals by the end of the year. We hope they will, because life of the most dangerous CFC molecules lasts from 70 to 100 years. The gases we release into our air today will linger in the stratosphere for generations yet to come. This is therefore the case where the sins of the fathers will surely be visited on their children and their children's children.

Lastly, I wish to refer to tourism as a separate and serious problem which has great importance for my country, for Greece and so many other countries.

The rapid growth of tourism in the last few decades has resulted in a degree of environmental degradation in a number of OECD countries. Environment is an important output into tourism and therefore the maintenance of a "good" environment is essential to the further growth of tourism. Conversely, a degradation of the environment could result in, and in certain cases already brought about, a decline in the growth of tourism. Moreover, there are environmental assets which should be preserved despite their potential touristic exploitation such as valuable ecosystems and landscapes, unique sites, monuments, etc.

For some countries, tourism is a substantial source of foreign exchange which helps to correct their trade balance. However, touristic development should not be allowed to proceed in an uncontrolled manner as in many cases in the past. A happy medium must be found between "tourism growth" and "environmental conservation", thus calling for careful choices which, while neither detrimental to one nor the other, will instead promote the tourist industry from a qualitative as well as from a quantitative stand point. It is the responsibility of government at the appropriate levels, local, national and international, to ensure that the environment is maintained in a condition which corresponds to the needs of the tourists, the local inhabitants and national objectives.

The indicators are that tourism will continue to grow, with the result that the pressure on the environment will be greater. This danger which is now realised by the majority of government will be greater. This danger which is now realised by the majority of governments should prompt them to take measures to ensure both the future of tourism and the preservation of the environment, tourism being the first to benefit from such measures. It is proposed that OECD governments in conjunction with the work of appropriate international organisations draw up a charter of the rights and obligations of tourists with regard to the preservation of the environment and accordingly set up an action plan with respect to information and education.

The concept of an ecologically sound development has been developed by the UN Environment Programme and its basic principles are simple: Development should respect the local ecosystem, it should conserve resources, using renewable resources whenever possible; it should respect local social and cultural patterns by involving the local population in deciding on the style and pace of development. Eco-development asks no more than that we should live today with tomorrow in mind. Basic values such as co-operation, justice and respect for nature are implicit in the new models of development.

In 1980 the major multilateral development assistance institutions signed a Declaration of Environmental Policies and Procedures, which commit them to ensuring as far as possible the environmental soundness of projects they finance. Similar actions have been taken by the principal Bilateral Development Aid Agencies, The World Bank, together with other international and national organisations, is at present using and developing improved detailed environmental health and human ecological criteria and guidelines in the assessment of development projects.

Another point which should be appreciated by all this is that most environmental problems do not stop at frontiers. What happens in the port of Marseilles affects the beaches of Cyprus; what industrial waste is thrown into the sea in Barcelona affects Malta; the pollution of the Danube in Austria affects the quality of the river water in Hungary; the phenomenon of dying forests is certainly the heavy penalty we all pay by the wrongful action of many countries; although the effect of deforestation occurs in the developing countries, the economic and ecological repercussions are highly significant for the industrial countries as well; a loss of species in developing countries would also have world-wide effects, for example, many medicines and pharmaceutical products in the industrial countries depend directly or indirectly on the diversity of species in the developing countries; the innovation potential of bio-technology is likewise dependent on the genetic reserves from developing countries. Therefore, North and South should recognise their common interest in effectively curbing the decrease in the diversity of the species.

National, domestic environmental policy alone is not enough. The environmental issue must become a topic for foreign policy and development policy. The success or failure of environmental policy cannot be measured within national boundaries. Joint action is now essential. The failure of national governments and the international community to respond adequately to the deforestation crisis has led to extremely high costs in developing countries. To quote from a recent report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: "Long range programs that would have helped to tackle the underlying problems have received comparatively little support. The antidesertification programme adopted by the UN in 1977 for example, was largely ignored by donor and recipient governments alike. The programme, it is interesting to note, was estimated to cost four and a half billion US\$ per annum to the year 2000 for the entire globe. A breakdown of this figure reveals that the estimated cost for Ethiopia was 50 million US\$ per year to the year 2000 but neither the political will nor the money could be found to implement this programme. Yet, eight years later, faced with a human drama beyond precedent, the community has had to find an estimated 400 million US dollars for crisis response measures to date for Ethiopia alone and this figure will undoubtedly exceed 500 million US dollars before the next harvest and it will go beyond that if the harvest fails again. Somehow we have to invent a politics of prevention that can match the politics of crisis.

Both the genesis and the way the environmental problems are handled must be seen in an international perspective. It should be appreciated that in view of ecological and economic interdependence the division into first, second and third world is basically obsolete and must ultimately be overcome. At present the environmental problems which the developing countries are facing are very serious and are problems of world concern. They may condition, not only the well being but likely also the very survival of mankind. Even if the rich of the world could free themselves from the feelings of solidarity with the poor countries, they would act against their own long-term interests if they decide not to be involved in their solution at all.

With the current state of knowledge of environmental systems and human health hazards in the environment, major negative effects can be prevented if planners anticipate them and provide for mitigating measures. People have now become more conscious and more sensitive to these ecological problems. Following the first World conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972, public opinion and the awareness of the population with regard to environmental issues was sensitised considerably. While in 1972 there were only 10 countries with some sort of organised environment administration, they now number roughly 120 and these organs are strengthening their capacity to assess environmental impacts and to enforce measures for the protection and management of natural resources.

"When this century began", the UN Commissioners say, "neither human numbers nor technology had the power to radically alter planetary systems. As the century closes, not only do vastly increased human numbers and their activities have that power, but major unintended changes are occurring in the atmosphere, in soils, in waters, among plants and animals and in the relationship among all of these. The rate of change is outstripping the ability of scientific disciplines and our current capabilities to assess and advise." To avert the serious ecological dangers, a major international campaign is needed to increase awareness of the potential dangers and calls for tighter national and international laws to protect the environment. The security, well-being and very survival of the planet depends on such concerted and immediate action.

### *Biography*

**Androulla Vassiliou**, barrister-at-law, has studied law and international relations at the Middle Temple Inn of Court and University College London. She has organised numerous UN meetings in Cyprus, and served as vice-Chairperson of the Executive Committee of WFUNA and as Secretary-General of the UNA of Cyprus. She is a member of the Cyprus Association for Equal Rights and Duties for Men and Women and vice-Chairperson of the Committee for the Restoration of Human Rights Throughout Cyprus.