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Summary of the discussion of session one ("Environmental trends, costs and policy issues through 1990")

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SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION OF SESSION ONE

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Issues

The Conference participants, on the basis of the Background Papers and of the presentations by the keynote speakers and discussants, specified a number of major issues that are likely to be important for environmental policy making through 1990. These issues, and other related questions, are as follows.

- There has been significant progress in the control of major conventional air and water pollutants (for example, SO_x, NO_x and so on) but in all OECD countries there is still a significant backlog of pollution. This is especially noticeable in the southern European Member countries. To what extent does this backlog need to be, and can it be, cleaned up by the end of this decade?
- Emissions of conventional pollutants could rise further during this decade unless major efforts are made to constrain them; in addition there are a number of emerging pollution problems posing serious challenges both to national policy making and international co-operation. These include toxic pollution, acid rain, hazardous waste and contamination of ground water. Do governments have the capacity to anticipate the effects of economic growth on conventional and new pollutants and what is the most likely environmental scenario through 1990?
- Major technological changes are now occurring in the OECD economies with important implications for the environment: production and materials developments; micro-electronics; bio-technologies. Do governments have the capacity to recognise these changes in time and make the best use of them?
- Side by side with pollution problems, resource management issues have emerged as a major environmental and economic challenge in a number of OECD countries. What are the major natural resources that need a broadly based, economically rational and environmentally acceptable approach?
- In spite of the economic difficulties experienced over the last decade, public support for environmental policies has remained steady or even increased. How can governments best assess the

'moving environmental targets' in the light of both public support for the environment and economic objectives; what type of past taboos will have to be revised (such as those surrounding nuclear energy or defence policies) in the light of this public support?

- Environmental policies are at present pursued subject to certain economic criteria (for example, that benefits should exceed costs); how can countries reconcile policies that create conflicting interests between sectors of the economy, but are complementary in terms of environment and economics at the national level? How far are environmental and economic objectives complementary? Where do they conflict and how can they be made complementary? Should irreversible changes in the environment be prevented at all cost?
- A number of environmental problems are international, some of them even global. The indications are that pollution problems of a transfrontier nature are increasing. What is OECD's role in contributing to the solution of these problems?
- There are close economic ties between OECD and developing countries that have important environmental implications. How can these economic ties be further developed to the mutual benefit of all countries involved and at the same time the environment of the developing world be safeguarded?

Responses

In discussing these issues a number of suggestions and proposals emerged that could provide the appropriate solutions of these problems. While there was no unanimity on all the suggestions, there was a broad consensus on a number of them.

Concerning the question of the backlog of conventional pollutants, there was a broad agreement that most countries should aim at -- and already are aiming at -- tightening standards. Consequently, in spite of the future growth of pollution activities, emissions of these pollutants should decline from the levels that obtained at the end of 1970.

In addition, it was agreed that governments should aim at anticipating both future developments concerning conventional pollutants and emerging pollution trends. Some of the OECD countries already have this capacity for conventional pollutants. One of the possible approaches is presented in the OECD Background Document and this could form part of anticipatory policies in many countries. Such projections of future trends should take into account structural changes in the economy as well as changes in control technologies and the spatial shifts in sources of pollution.

There were various views expressed on future trends in the cost of pollution control. One view put forward was that improved technologies should lead to reduced costs of control. At the same time it was suggested that more stringent environmental standards must increase the cost of control. Overall, however, there was an agreement that if countries try at the minimum to keep total pollution to current levels, total costs of control could rise quite substantially -- and any further reduction in emissions would cost even more.

Consequently, policies should be devised that make controls more efficient and therefore less costly.

Discussion of future approaches to environmental policy making centred on the need for a capacity for early problem identification. To have policies accepted that deal with problems that will become apparent only in 5 to 10 years time (but necessitate investment now) will require clear explanation in terms of both costs and benefits. OECD countries need to join together in a common assessment of the problem, which would in turn help them to clarify the issues to their own public; on these issues the acceptance of measures aimed at reducing environmental risk 5 to 10 years ahead would help.

It was generally agreed that the pace of environmental policies should be determined not by the slowest and least environmentally developed OECD countries but rather by the forward-looking Members. Even today in relatively widely accepted problem solutions such as the use of low-lead petrol, most OECD countries are 10 years behind the lead country in introducing it.

Integrated approaches to environmental problems were advocated by a number of countries. However, the interpretation of integration varied somewhat. On one level it was argued that different sources of pollution interact and comprehensive policies will be required to deal with multi-source pollution. On another level it was suggested that for environmental policy purposes the entire production and development process should be examined and that there is a need to search for an equilibrium of resources: labour, technology, social impacts and environmental inputs.

Considerable concern was expressed at the state of the environment and future trends in the southern European Member countries, and the possibility that from the environmental point of view the differences between southern Europe and the rest of the OECD could widen. The view was expressed that the OECD Mediterranean countries are subject to considerable environmental pressure, partly from the rest of the OECD countries through tourism and partly from northern African countries. Therefore, there is some obligation on these other countries to help combat pollution in a co-operative effort. Accelerated and significantly more vigorous policies are needed to stop the further growth of pollution in southern Europe, and co-operative effort should also include technical assistance.

On a more technical level it was argued that the majority of OECD countries lack the data necessary (on pollution and on ecological and economic impacts) to carry out efficient reactive, let alone anticipatory, policies. This is true for conventional pollutants but even more so for emerging issues: hazardous waste, chemicals, acid rain, natural resources and global problems (such as carbon monoxide). Considerable additional effort is needed along the lines already indicated in various OECD countries -- and work on environmental expenditures and the state of the environment is urgently needed -- to provide the necessary policy basis for reactive and anticipatory action at both the national and the global level.

OECD Responsibilities

In the field of anticipatory policies, the OECD should continue with its leadership role in developing the necessary background data for the assessment of future problems, including possible costs and economic impacts.

A common approach within the OECD to the impact of technological developments on the environment and environmental policies should be combined with these assessments.

At the same time, in order to extend the standard economic models used in the OECD, work should take into account the economy as a physical system; that is, the main polluting production processes, the siting of economic activities, the stock of certain equipment and goods (such as the motor car population) and certain activities where the market system could fail.

The OECD should develop proposals to accelerate environmental protection in the southern European Member countries in order to bring them more in line with other OECD countries.

The OECD should assess the environmental relations between OECD and developing countries and propose ways and means by which the environments of these developing countries could be safeguarded while at the same time assuring their economic development.

OECD should assume responsibility for providing guidance on reducing the threat to the global environment in a number of areas.