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Gerhard Maier*

International Environmental Policy Perspectives for the Nineties

Indications of a fundamental change in the climate, worsening pollution of international waters, destruction of the atmosphere, and other disconcerting changes in the environment are international problems that know no boundaries and affect the global community. Nevertheless there exist hardly any plans for concerted action. Environmental problems are still being handled mainly on a national scale. The road to an international environmental policy is long and fraught with conflict.

The global aspects of environmental damage have long been on the agenda of international conferences, not just at world summits, like that in Paris recently, but as the subject of specialized international meetings and agreements.¹ These efforts have so far produced rather meagre results. International cooperation in environmental protection would seem to be as difficult as that in the spheres of monetary policy, trade policy and the reduction of Third World debt. The ecological problems could turn out to be even more serious, though, so it is high time things got underway.

Ecological issues highlight international interdependence with particular force. The atmosphere and the oceans are global matters that transcend national borders. As Chernobyl clearly demonstrated, if one nation emits some poisonous substance, the impact is not confined to its own territory but has repercussions on numerous other countries. Even a country with a good record on environment cannot exist in some kind of ecological enclave. Going it alone is seldom worth the effort. In future, joint solutions must be found, to mitigate if not to reverse dangerous developments.

Greenhouse Earth

The so-called greenhouse effect is now a household term. The natural ability of the atmosphere to store warmth is in fact a precondition for life.² If this ability increases, i.e. if the earth gradually warms up, it becomes a problem. If hydrocarbons and certain other gases become too concentrated in the atmosphere, a smaller percentage of the sun's rays are reflected back into space and this is what appears to be happening at the moment. Putative indicators are at least the extreme drought in the USA last year and the long and hot summer in Europe. The causes may well be natural:

volcanoes, forest fires caused by lightning, oxidation of plants. There is however the danger that the greenhouse effect is exacerbated partly by human incursions into nature.

If the earth heats up, the living conditions alter considerably. One of the most horrifying visions is of the glaciers in the mountain regions and in the polar cap melting, forcing up the sea level enormously, thus inundating low-lying territories like Denmark, Holland, Bangladesh, etc. Another fear is that the subtropical belts and their related comparatively stationary high pressure zones could shift towards the poles, which could mean spreading desertification because the rainfall areas would also change position.

These processes are not, however, calculable, because the warming of the earth triggers countermechanisms: evaporation steps up bringing about denser cloud formation, which in turn reflects more sunlight.

Nonetheless, the danger of climatic change cannot be dismissed out of hand. The greenhouse effect can only be combated at the roots, by stopping or at least slowing down the growth of carbon dioxide emissions originating from human activity. In practical terms this means less combustion of fossil fuels. In the above-mentioned relations of interdependence, there is little point in one country going ahead on its own. The greenhouse effect can only be kept in check by a globally oriented, internationally coordinated policy. This is however easier said than done.

With present technologies and lifestyles, the

¹ Cf. Erika Feldmann: Die Internationalisierung des Umweltschutzes, in: Europa – Archiv, No. 18/1988, p. 501 ff.

² Cf. Neville Brown: Der Treibhauseffekt: eine weltweite Herausforderung, in: Europa – Archiv, No. 8/1989, p. 231 ff.

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improvement of the economic living conditions, as measured by GNP growth, generates a more than proportionate increase in carbon dioxide emissions. Particularly in the Third World there is a huge backlog to make up in many areas of life. With present technologies and modelled on the ways of life of the industrialized nations, the urgently needed improvement in living standards in the developing countries would cause serious ecological problems for the whole world. If for example the entire population of the earth, some five billion people, were to make use of petrol driven vehicles and air conditioning plants at the same rate as the West Europeans or the Americans, this would have an explosive impact on the volume of toxic emissions.

The debate on the greenhouse effect is thus viewed with distrust by the Third World; people there suspect that the environmentalist argument is being used to keep them in a state of backwardness. There is little sympathy for radical ecologists who call for zero growth.

In the final analysis, the greenhouse effect can only be curbed by replacing fossil fuels with suitable alternatives. For the foreseeable future, this means substituting the combustion of oil or coal with nuclear power, possibly in part also with solar energy.

Destruction of the Ozone Layer

A twin phenomenon of the greenhouse effect, at least for the media, is the so-called ozone gap. The ozone layer enveloping the earth absorbs a part of the harmful rays from the sun. In this layer a hole has appeared above the South Pole which is widening. If the ozone layer continues to thin out the cases of skin cancer are likely to multiply drastically. Blame for the ozone gap is placed at the door of human intervention. It is assumed that the ozone layer is being destroyed partly by so-called chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) contained for example in aerosols or in refrigerators. Better living standards for ever more people on the planet have thus led to much greater hazards for the environment. Help is expected from technological changes. Worldwide there are efforts to curtail the use of such gases. The EC for instance has announced a ban on certain toxic substances by the year 2000. Here another North-South conflict arises since it is hardly reasonable to expect the Third World to do without the conveniences usual in the industrialized countries.

The Tropics as Museums?

Another source of dispute between North and South is the spreading devastation of the tropical rainforests. Large expanses in Latin America, Africa and South East

Asia are being destroyed. At the present rate, the tropical rain forests will vanish in the course of the next century.

The destruction of the tropical rainforests has many causes. In recent years, tropical timber has been a large foreign exchange earner for many countries in the Third World. A more serious factor is that, especially in countries with impoverished populations, forest land is cleared to make room for cropland. Extensive patches of forest are burnt. Another causal element is the growing demand for fuelwood on the part of the rapidly expanding population.

Tropical rainforests are closed systems, so felling and burning trees makes the soil infertile and erosion sets in. Damage is not only inflicted on the countries themselves; burning forest generates carbon dioxide and is a possible contributory factor to the greenhouse effect. The eradication of the tropical rainforests also affects the regional air currents. There is a danger that this could prompt climatic changes which also have an impact on the northern hemisphere. It is conceivable that the global wind and sea currents will alter; there might even be a shift in the Gulf Stream.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the industrialized countries are also concerned to halt the extermination of the tropical rainforests. Their influence is, however, restricted. They cannot expect the developing countries to convert their forests into museums. Some countries like Brazil sharply rebuff the criticism of forest destruction as interference in their own internal affairs.

This reaction is understandable: the desperate economic situation in many of these nations narrows their time horizons. The losses that will have to be borne mainly by future generations seem to many policymakers in the Third World to be the lesser evil in view of the often abject poverty of their populations and foreign debts which cannot be paid back in the foreseeable future. The prosperity in the industrialized nations affords them the apparent luxury of a somewhat longer time horizon. It therefore makes sense to them to induce the countries in question to align their behaviour with global and long-term interests by paying them in some way or other.

Debt-Nature Swaps

A major topic of international discussion today is the proposed part cancellation of debts for the usually heavily indebted tropical countries in exchange for the conservation of certain regions. This kind of debt-nature swap has for example been tried out in Bolivia.

American conservationists acquired claims of commercial banks on the country which they then waived on the condition that certain regions be converted into nature conservation parks. The Government of the Federal Republic of Germany has also proposed rescinding repayment of government loans to certain countries in return for their meeting specific environmental conditionalities. Government agencies could also assume private debts and cancel these for environmental protection measures.

Policymakers have so far been rather unimaginative on the problem of checking the increasing pollution of the seas and rivers by oil and chemical waste. Indications are the algae plague and possibly the seal deaths. One of the problems here is the limited control facilities. The recurrent oil tanker disasters demonstrate how difficult it is to enforce safety regulations on the open seas. Monitoring via satellite and more pressure on the oil firms could help contain the problem.

So far no solutions are in sight for the problems associated with the extraction of scarce raw materials. Though relatively modest, some progress has however been made in protecting species of flora and fauna.

Problems of International Coordination

As with other areas of international cooperation, coordination in global environmental protection is also beset with serious stumbling blocks. The disparity of political and philosophical views internationally makes it difficult to find a common denominator for everyone, that is ultimately the world's population represented by governments, businesses, associations and other interest groups. Despite broad agreement on the urgent need to take action, there is little consensus on how this is to be done and who is to foot the bill. Banning aerosols or occasional debt-nature swaps alone will not bring about any substantial changes. International conventions must be drafted to ensure that greater care is taken to conserve the natural environment. The

Eastern bloc and the Third World will have to be included in this effort.

There is little point in setting up new institutions like an international environment authority, which would only result in enormous costs and remain largely ineffectual. One possibility could be a kind of environmental GATT, a network of international agreements, breaches to be punished by sanctions. International trade talks, though, underscore how difficult this is.

Reward for Protecting the Environment

The essential problem is always that of external effects, i.e. costs or benefits not borne or reaped by those who cause them. In environmental protection the prime issue is external costs. How can they be regulated? There are two basic options: the originator of external costs is either penalized, or rewarded if he lowers these costs. Penalties are prohibitions, restrictions, taxes or fines. Such measures are even more difficult to implement at the international level than they are at the national level. Although it would be conceivable to punish violations of international conventions by means of boycotts or other trade restrictions, such weapons are too crude and there is the danger that they would be abused for basically protectionist purposes.

That leaves reward. An example of this approach is debt-nature swaps. It is pragmatic but also logical that the beneficiaries of a better environment should pay for rewarding those who take measures to reduce the harmful effects of their activities. This principle has been applied in the Federal Republic of Germany for example, with the so-called "water pfennig". Since everyone is both sinner and sinned against, a system of transfer payments, though complex, might be practicable without there having to be disproportionate net payments and receipts. In this system, West Germany for example could pay for the conservation of the tropical rainforests or less oil pollution of the oceans, while receiving payment for reducing its own industrial emissions.

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