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INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT: SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

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The assumption that rational men could devise and manage institutions to serve successfully the goals of society is embedded in Western liberal thought. At best, this faith has tended to be neglected in recent times and, at worst, has come under direct or indirect challenge. "Establishments" of any kind, including bodies chosen by the electorate, can scarcely be said to enjoy great public confidence these days.

Yet in the face of this, we now confront the novel task of organizing, or reorganizing, international institutions to cope with "environmental management" on a global scale. How?

The idea of "world government" has been nourished during its ups and downs almost entirely by the notion that this is the only sure formula for abolishing war. For those who have dreamed this dream, the answer to recurrent conflict seemed to lie in a "parliament of man" with the authority to pass laws, an executive with the power to enforce the laws, and a judiciary system to settle international disputes on the basis of law without recourse to violence.

The League of Nations undertook certain activities, like narcotics control, unrelated to keeping the peace, but expired because of its failure to prevent more wars.

The opening words of the preamble of the United Nations Charter assert the determination "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war . . ." The United Nations has had more success in keeping or repairing the peace than is generally credited to it. Yet nothing is plainer than the fact that we still live in a world dominated by nation-states, armed beyond any previous imagination of military power, clinging to nineteenth-century strategic concepts, and accustomed to international competition for control over world resources and trade. The prospect of "world government," to deal with the environment or anything else, appears as remote as ever—regardless of whether it was a good idea in the first place.

At the same time, apart from the General Assembly and the Security Council of the United Nations, an impressive array of international organizations—intergovernmental, nongovernmental, and in a few cases, mixed—have come into being at transnational, regional, or near-global levels during the past quarter of a century. They are an

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important part of what Teilhard de Chardin called the nōosphere and they have been hailed, not without reason, as the foundations for a cooperatively working world community.¹ At this point, several basic things need to be said about the general characteristics of these international institutions:

First, intergovernmental organizations have no resources beyond what national governments agree to delegate to them. Their power is minimal to the task at hand, restricted in scope, and subject to sudden cancellation by withdrawal of national support. Moreover, governments tend to keep their international civil servants on a very short leash and only rarely do the leaders of intergovernmental agencies develop personal influence or following.

Second, international organizations are specialized and have inadequate mechanisms—or interest—in coordination of their work. They pursue their sectoral goals without much attention to the side effects upon other areas of activity and so work, to some extent, at cross purposes.

Third, international organizations—notably those within the United Nations system of agencies—are stuck with the principle of “geographic representation” on both governing bodies and staffing patterns. Most governments want to be represented in the affairs of most international agencies and, as membership in the United Nations has grown, there has been inexorable pressure to expand the size of governing bodies, beginning with the Security Council. Last year the membership of the UN Committee on the Seabeds, for example, was expanded from forty-two to eighty-six nations. Principles of administrative efficiency appear to be in conflict with principles of political representation in international institutions.

These points are made not to *contrast* intergovernmental institutions with national agencies of government, but to say that their problems and shortcomings are highly *analogous* to those of national governments. The similarities of the institutional predicament at national and international levels of organization are especially apparent in the case of environmental issues.

Like agencies of national governments, the agencies within the UN system have been engaged, in some cases for many years, with bits and pieces of subjects now lumped under the rubric of the “environmental crisis”—soil erosion, water pollution, urbanization, population control, etc.

Like agencies of national governments, the UN agencies have been dealing with each of these subjects in a compartmentalized way—indifferent if not hostile to what other agencies, or even other

1. Teilhard de Chardin, *Man's Place In Nature* (1966).

branches within the same agency, were doing within their own specialized bailiwicks.

And like economic agencies of national and subnational governments, the economic agencies of the UN system have been focused on the all-out promotion of growth in economic output, measured by traditional quantitative standards without regard to external economic or social cost. Nor have they seriously questioned the assumption that technology not only is transferable from one geographic and cultural setting to another but that the next stage of technology in any line is automatically better than the last.

All this, of course, simply reflects the thinking of national governments which authorized, financed and shaped the policies of these international activities in the first instance. If international institutions are not well conceived or organized for the tasks of environmental management—nor endowed with an “environmental point of view”—nor prepared for decision-making on the basis of alternatives and trade-offs, it is basically because national governments suffer similar drawbacks.

Is this to say that the existing international structure of specialized agencies, like the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization, needs to be abolished in favor of a fresh start? The answer is probably not—again an analogy with national institutions. When the Executive Branch of the U.S. government was reorganized to create two new environmental agencies, old-line governmental departments around Washington were stripped of a large number of their former functions. The Department of Agriculture, for example, was put out of the business of regulating the use of pesticides and herbicides.

But a technically qualified national Department of Agriculture presumably will be needed for the indefinite future—no doubt more concerned with such matters as land use planning than it has been in the past. By the same token, the Food and Agriculture Organization no doubt will continue to exist at the international level—perhaps minus a few of its present functions, perhaps with added responsibilities in such environmentally important areas as planning the stabilization of marginal lands on a global basis.

It is too soon to predict the extent to which the UN system will be adapted in the longer term to cope more effectively with environmental issues. The first test will come at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in June of 1972. That conference is expected to adopt a work program of environmental subjects on which it is agreed that some form of international cooperation will take place in the post-Stockholm years. During the second week of

the Stockholm proceedings, one of the three conference committees will debate "the institutional implications" of the package of agreements expected to emerge from the conference. It is the intention of Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference, to present governments with proposals to vote up or vote down, not only with respect to specified projects for international cooperation but with respect to institutional assignments for work on each problem. The studies and recommendations for institutional assignments, however, are yet to be made.

At this stage it is easy to be pessimistic about the likelihood of a major reform or revival of the UN system to meet the environmental challenge. The difficulties are enormous. Among the most obvious are: resistance to change on the part of existing international agencies; ideological obstacles in the East-West context; suspicions that environmental quality will be pursued at the cost of economic development in the North-South context; a threatened impingement on traditional concepts of "national sovereignty"; a general distaste for international "machinery" on the part of some governments; resource allocation problems which influence governments toward placing priorities on the more parochial manifestations of environmental problems; and funding for what necessarily will be an expensive business.

Yet there are countervailing factors at work. For one thing, there is no possibility that the environmental issue will go away; one of its essential characteristics is that the problem is now permanent.

Another thing is that at least some aspects of the environmental crisis—notably atmospheric and oceanic pollution—are so inherently global that the option of national action does not realistically exist. International cooperation is literally the only way to cope.

What's more, concern for environmental quality has powerful public support. And this is what stirs and stiffens the political will of bureaucracies—whether they be international, national or local, public or private.

If public support is aroused only in highly industrialized countries, it is those countries which supply most of the political leadership within the UN and almost all of its technical and financial resources.

Finally, the environmental issue almost certainly is going to prove to be a powerful instrument for social reform—from the recasting of values and priorities to the redesign of mechanisms for decision-making. Such reforms no doubt will move at different paces in different societies but must at some point reach the international community.

In the short term, it would be sheer guesswork to predict how the

world is going to be organized for environmental management. And it is important to note that any intelligent institutional arrangements will be consciously open-ended and transitory if they are to be capable of adaptation to an environmental situation in a constant state of dynamic change. Indeed a case can be made for avoiding commitments on institutional questions in favor of a deliberately experimental approach, on the grounds that so little is known about the environment that institutional design must await greater knowledge.

Yet for the longer-term, it is not quite so difficult to perceive the general directions in which institutional arrangements on environmental questions are likely to move at the international level. Six such trends are suggested here:

First, the traditional institutional boundaries between governmental and nongovernmental, physical and social sciences, professional, technical, legal, academic, and public interest organizations will be criss-crossed and blurred if not eliminated. One result will be to draw wider segments of society into an interdisciplinary process of decision-making and significantly strengthen the roles of nongovernmental institutions.

Second, new institutions will tend to take the form of "centers" serving as hubs for "networks" of institutional constituents. They will be headquarters or service centers for federations or working alliances of more traditional, more specialized institutions.

Third, international organization for environmental tasks will move in the direction of the "task force" approach—*ad hoc*, problem-oriented concentrations of people and resources with specified jobs to do within specified periods of time, after which they will be disassembled, perhaps to be replaced by other groups.

Fourth, information systems—gathering, processing, analyzing, distributing and storing data—will tend to be near the functional heart of environmental institutions.

Fifth, there will be a trend toward new and/or adapted international regional organization—less along the lines of regions defined by present political groupings and more along the lines of environmentally-related regions such as river systems, airsheds, watersheds and biomes.

Sixth, the permanent bureaucracies within international environmental organizations will tend to be the minimum required for administrative continuity; the bulk of professional personnel will serve for relatively short periods of time.

These trends probably will characterize international organization

to research, study and analyze environmental issues that are poorly understood today. But this leaves in limbo the question of a more formal, more central, more continuous institutional instrument for environmental policy direction at the international level. Before drawing organization charts and raising jurisdictional issues, it would be well to pause and consider the basic approaches that might be taken toward such an instrument by institution designers.

One approach is to begin by looking upon environmental degradation as a threat against which the world must adopt a policy of defense. This leads directly to discussion of the need for "monitoring" or "surveillance"—and to talk of "standards" and "controls" and "enforcement" and "dispute settlement machinery." At this point the whole affair begins to look like a police function in an adversary setting. This approach, I suggest, would maximize political, ideological, emotional and semantic obstacles to getting on with the job.

Alternatively, one could back off and run at the problem from a diametrically opposite approach: what kind of institutions are needed to direct a positive, constructive enterprise *to improve the human environment*? How can we *develop* the environment and raise the productivity of the ecosystem for the benefit of man and nature? This approach would lead to emphasis on intensive international searches for, say, a harmless substitute for nitrogen fertilizer, etc., etc., etc.

If development of a healthy, productive environment is the dominant theme of the enterprise, it should attract leading scientists, researchers, planners and specialists from around the world. Whatever monitoring might be necessary could be subordinated to the role of supporting research, not that of a dominant policing system.

Such an approach would minimize the difficulties inherent in international agreements and the widespread suspicion that environmental management is anti-development. It might also go a long way toward offsetting the inherent lack of power of international organizations tolerated by nation-states still zealous of their independence.

An institution with a name such as the Environmental Development Authority would be operating on the leading edge of knowledge. It could acquire an international analytical capability and bodies of data available in no other place. From this would flow the prestige of authority—a kind of authority which may well be more influential in the world of tomorrow than more traditional forms of power associated with sovereign states pursuing their "interests" in a competitive setting.