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The Persistence of Old Problems: The Politics of Environment and Development at the Rio Earth Summit

Standing before exasperated delegates on June 12, 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, President George H. W. Bush spoke in vague terms. "We believe that the road to Rio must point toward both environmental protection and economic growth, environment and development," the president proclaimed. "By now it's clear: To sustain development, we must protect the environment. And to protect the environment, we must sustain development."[1]

President Bush's words left many onlookers baffled. On the one hand, Bush spoke the language of sustainability, noting the interrelationship between economic development and environmental protection. Soon after his speech, the president signed the conference's formal declaration, which proclaimed "sustainable development" as the discursive framework for the United Nations' development policies. He acknowledged the need to integrate environmental protection into all economic development policies. On the other hand, President Bush did not attempt to describe exactly how that process would occur. He also rejected many of the formal conventions on the table in Rio. The president refused to sign a treaty on biodiversity protection, and he only agreed to support an agreement on global climate change that came without any binding stipulations. Although the president had accepted the necessity of crafting environmentally friendly approaches

[1] George H. W. Bush, "Address to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil," June 12, 1992. [Online] Available: http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=4417&year=&month. Accessed December 28, 2009.

to development, it was clear that full cooperation and significant concrete measures remained out of reach.

The gulf between the president's rhetoric and actions revealed two salient aspects of how the relationship between environmentalism and economic development had evolved over the previous decades. As President Bush's speech indicated, the conference legitimized the use of sustainability rhetoric to acknowledge the link between environmental protection and economic development, which major environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had been promoting for over a decade. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, many policy makers conceived of environmental protection and economic policy as separate policy domains; by 1992, every government leader acknowledged the interconnectedness of the two concepts and every leader spoke of "sustainable development." In some respects, NGOs such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) had succeeded beyond their expectations in popularizing the sustainability concept.[2]

Despite this rhetorical shift, the Rio Conference also highlighted a decades-long continuity in the international politics of environment protection. As had been the case for decades, the question of "additionality," whether the industrialized nations would commit to new and additional resource transfers to fund environmental protection programs in the developing world, dominated discussions over international environmental accords. In the years before the Rio Conference, many environmental NGOs had helped to demonstrate the tremendous ecological and economic threats posed to the developing world by trends such as desertification, species loss, deforestation, and global climate change. Developing countries organized again through the Group of 77 (G-77), although the organization carried less influence than it did in the 1970s as Third World activism and support for the New International Economic Order had waned considerably by the 1980s.[3] G-77 countries recognized these threats but resisted binding environmental accords that did not also

[2] The leading accounts of the Rio Earth Summit, which have been written by participants, journalists, or political scientists, all acknowledge this basic fact. See Engfeldt, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg and Beyond*; Hopgood, *American Foreign Environmental Policy and the Power of the State*; Philip Shabecoff, *A New Name for Peace: International Environmentalism, Sustainable Development, and Democracy* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996).

[3] Vanessa Ogle, "State Rights against Private Capital: The "New International Economic Order" and "The Struggle over Aid, Trade, and Investment, 1962–1981," *Humanity*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2014), 211–34.

include increased foreign aid transfers and more favorable terms for technology transfer. Many key environmentalists, including the Rio Conference's General-Secretary Maurice Strong, had come to sympathize with the G-77 position and demand additionality as a sine qua non of any major agreement in Rio, too. Most industrialized nations, however, once again rejected any substantial increases in direct resource transfers.

In particular, the United States' resistance to additionality scuttled negotiations in the lead-up to Rio. The Bush administration was willing to give explicit rhetorical support to most environmental issues, but it was unwilling to incur substantial additional financial obligations vis-à-vis the developing countries. The administration often couched their position – which resembled Nixon and Kissinger's stance at the Stockholm Conference – in a pro-market rhetoric that demonized any new regulations. Since the 1970s, a "culture of faith in the market" suffused American life, as the private sector and market forces became viewed as the ideal tools for pursuing economic development and much else.[4] Bush administration officials consistently lauded the power of market principles to solve environmental problems, frequently invoking arguments about the logic of incentives, the virtues of cost-benefit analysis, and the perils of increased government regulation. The Bush administration, in turn, rejected any international agreements – such as the treaty over climate change – that called for binding regulations or a major increase in foreign aid flows.

[4] The phrase comes from Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 5. On the rise of market fundamentalism, see also Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), chapter 12; Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). This faith in market-based solutions also appeared in international development circles in the 1980s with the "Washington Consensus" policies that focused on liberalizing trade, sound monetary policy, cutting back the public sector. See, for instance, John Williamson, "Democracy and the Washington Consensus," *World Development*, Vol. 21 (1993), 1329–36; Philip Arestis, "Washington Consensus and Financial Liberalization," *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2004–2005); Narcís Serra and Joseph E. Stiglitz, eds., *The Washington Consensus Reconsidered: Towards a New Global Governance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Eklbadh, *The Great American Mission*, chapter 8. On the broader global shift toward the market, see Mazower, *Governing the World*, chapter 12. On the growing consensus around market-based solutions for international environmental issues during the late 1980s, see Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism*, 70–83.

Moreover, many Bush administration officials believed that the end of the Cold War revealed that any kind of centralized or extensive regulatory system could not and would not ameliorate social, political, or even environmental problems. Although many observers hoped that the end of the Cold War would signify a new era of international cooperation over international environmental matters, in practice the collapse of the "second world" reinforced the belief of Bush administration officials that freer trade and fewer regulations, not more foreign aid, would best redress international environmental problems. In spite of the shifting international system, comprehensive and concrete measures at the Rio gathering in 1992 proved elusive because of many of the same tensions that had beguiled participants at the 1972 Stockholm Conference. As was the case in Stockholm, environmental protection in the developing world foundered in discussions over North-South economic relations.

In the end, the debates over additionality also exposed the weakness of the new sustainability discourse. Robert Allen and the IUCN officials who crafted the *World Conservation Strategy* had learned that defining sustainable development was a contentious process. Once in the mainstream of development discourse, the phrase became even more ambiguous. Already by the time of the conference, astute observers noted that the phrase had acquired over forty different definitions.[5] Environmentalists, policy makers, and industry leaders often interpreted the phrase quite differently. For some, it was a rich concept that signaled a new ethic and responsibility toward the natural world and a need for global socioeconomic equality; for others, it was a hollow slogan that amounted to little more than "green-washing" of existing development practices. What few questioned, however, was that the concept sanctioned continued economic growth and placed environmental protection in the service of economic development, as President Bush had noted in his June 12th speech to the Rio delegations. The Stockholm Conference had left many environmentalists feeling enthusiastic about the possibility for future reform. The disconnect between the sustainability discourse and the absence of sufficient cooperation over additionality after the Rio meeting left the environmental community far more uneasy and uncertain about the future.

[5] Steven Bernstein also notes that the Rio Declaration "does not even attempt a consensus definition." Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism*, 5. Bernstein draws his number from the "gallery of definitions" provided in David Pearce, Anil Markandya, and Edward Barbier, *Blueprint for a Green Economy* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1989), 173–85.

THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE 1980S: THE BACKGROUND TO RIO

The idea for a major twenty-year follow-up conference to Stockholm came largely from Maurice Strong. In October 1986, Strong visited Sweden to meet with former officials who had been instrumental in setting up the original UN environmental gathering. Strong informed them of his work with the Brundtland Commission. He wanted the Brundtland Commission's report to receive widespread attention, and he also hoped that a major international conference could pressure major states to adopt its guidelines. Recent efforts to implement the "sustainable development" approach to planning in the developing world disappointed Strong and many other activists in the environmental community. The *World Conservation Strategy*, for instance, generated positive reviews as a general guide but had yet to be implemented systematically at the national level. Likewise, the formal ten-year follow-up to Stockholm, a gathering of the UNEP General Council in Nairobi in 1982, generated little fanfare outside the environmental community and UN system. Strong believed that only another international conference like Stockholm could make meaningful steps to ensure the Brundtland Commission's report would not meet a similar fate to the *World Conservation Strategy*.[6]

Strong also recognized the importance of "additionality" and personally sympathized with the ongoing economic and fiscal challenges afflicting the developing world. He had nurtured close ties with leaders and intellectuals from the Global South, and his experiences in reshaping many environmental NGOs during the 1970s had been spurred by his desire for environmentalists to pay greater attention to problems such as poverty and inequality. Strong believed that "industrialized and developing countries would have to change the way they deal with each other," for the *World Conservation Strategy*'s sustainable development method of planning to take hold.[7]

Strong's desire to implement sustainable development practices and redress economic imbalances appeared increasingly urgent in the mid-1980s. When Strong and his Swedish colleagues met for lunch in September 1986, in Washington, DC, environmentalists protested the World Bank's support for destructive development programs in Brazil and India. The crushing burden of the global debt crisis, coupled with

[6] Engfeldt, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg and Beyond*, 114–17; Strong, *Where on Earth Are We Going?*, 194–5.

[7] Strong, *Where on Earth Are We Going?*, 205.

structural adjustment policies premised on export-led recovery, spurred many developing nations to pursue strategies that raise short-term revenues at the expense of long-term planning. Tropical deforestation and growing desertification, in particular, became major global problems.[8] Such trends seemed all the more worrisome in light of the emerging scientific research on "biodiversity," which suggested that species loss greatly harmed the ecosystems and the ecological processes that supported life on earth.[9] Finally, a series of horrific disasters around large industrial sites – such as the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, India, and the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union – offered stark warnings of unheeded development.[10]

Most troubling of all, new scientific research over the previous decade had revealed that industrial development had profoundly altered the planet's life support systems. The ozone layer of the atmosphere had been torn apart, leaving a gaping hole over Antarctica. Acid rain, toxic precipitation caused by industrial emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, corroded the built and natural environment alike and imperiled human health across the globe. Worse still, the global climate appeared to be warming, driven in part by carbon emissions stemming from growing reliance on fossil fuels as a cheap energy source for economic development worldwide. Global climate change threatened every natural system of the planet and posed human society with unknown and unprecedented risks. These were all truly global problems for which there was little in the way of institutional or political precedents to manage.[11] The combination of

[8] NGOs had taken an interest in deforestation in the tropics as a major issue in the 1970s, and many began to link its spread to the debt crisis by the early 1980s. Barbara J. Bramble and Tom Plant, "Third World Debt and Natural Resources Conservation," carton 15–18 Debt for Nature Swaps, July-December, 1989, Sierra Club International Program Records; "Debt-for-Nature Swaps: A New Conservation Tool," *World Wildlife Fund Letter*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1988); "Commentary," *Conservation Foundation Letter*, January–February 1986, 2.

[9] See Jane Guyer and Paul Richards, "The Invention of Biodiversity: Social Perspectives on the Management of Biological Variety in Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (1996), 1–13. The IUCN and the WWF had begun promoting the term in the 1970s, and formalized a definition at the 1982 World Congress on National Parks. Bruce A. Wilcox, "In Situ Conservation of Genetic Resources: Determinants of Minimum Area Requirements," in McNeely and Miller, eds., *National Parks, Conservation, and Development: The Role of Protected Areas in Sustaining Society*, 639–47.

[10] Shabecoff, *A New Name for Peace*, 55.

[11] On the ozone, see Edward Parson, "Protecting the Ozone Layer" in Peter M. Haas, Robert O. Keohane, and Marc A. Levy, eds., *Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective International Environmental Protection* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993),

ongoing environmental destruction and these new threats amounted to "an emerging global crisis," claimed the IUCN.[12]

Strong and his Swedish colleagues believed these problems all required global cooperation and immediate action. In September 1987 Swedish delegates to the UN put forth a proposal at the UN General Assembly to host a twenty-year follow-up to Stockholm that would identify frameworks for both national and international action to promote "sustainable development" as the Brundtland Commission had defined it.[13] In planning the conference, Strong identified six key goals for the conference: the drafting of an "Earth Charter," inspired in part by a follow-up under way to the *World Conservation Strategy*; the drafting of "Agenda 21," a follow-up to Stockholm's Action Plan that would lay out a strategy for all nations achieving "sustainable development" models of planning; formal institutions to oversee Agenda 21; financial agreements to fund Agenda 21; discussion over rules for technology transfers; and conventions on climate change and the protection of biological diversity (which later grew to include conventions on forest protection and desertification).[14] The questions of North-South resource transfers underscored each goal. The outcome of the conference, Strong admitted, depended on the North's willingness to commit greater resources to the South. On these issues, he believed, "The North [had] to budge."[15]

Strong's framing of the conference along these lines ensured that the 1992 meeting would be dominated by many of the same economic and political questions that had shaped the Stockholm gathering. Brazil, the nation that had taken so central a role in articulating these points in 1972, reemerged through the G-77 as the leading voice over international economic issues in 1987. Although Sweden initially offered to host the 1992 gathering, Brazil, with G-77 backing, countered. As a result, when the UN finally agreed to host the conference in December 1989, Rio de Janeiro,

27–74; on acid rain, see Marc A. Levy, "European Acid Rain: The Power of Tote-Board Diplomacy," in Haas, Keohane, and Levy, eds., *Institutions for the Earth*, 75–132; on climate change, see Spencer Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[12] *Director General's Report on the Activities of the Union Since the 16th Session of the IUCN General Assembly in November 1984 to May 1985*, May 1985, iii. IUCN Library, Gland Switzerland.

[13] Strong, *Where on Earth Are We Going?*, 195–6.

[14] Engfeldt, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg and Beyond*, 144.

[15] Ross Howard, "Earth Summit: North Is North, South Is South, Will Ever the Twain Meet?" *The Globe and Mail*, August 24, 1991.

not Stockholm, won the right to host the conference.[16] The choice to host the gathering in the developing world held great symbolic power. If the negotiations at Rio were going to generate meaningful action on environmental issues, participants would first have to make concrete agreements on issues of international development and financial assistance.

ENVIRONMENTALISM IN THE LEAD-UP TO RIO

While the North-South conflict loomed over the Rio preparations, NGOs had many reasons to be hopeful at the start of the negotiating process. NGOs had generated many important institutional responses to the environmental threats of the 1980s. For instance, the IUCN took a leading role in shaping international action over biodiversity protection. The organization's transition to the "conservation *for* development" message in the 1970s led it to adopt the language of biodiversity as a more politically palatable alternative to older notions of national park and protected area policies. In 1982, at the Third World Conference on National Parks held in Bali, Indonesia, IUCN officials working on protected areas positioned themselves to focus on "sustainable resource management and sustainable wildlife use," rather than older preservationist notions. Following the meeting, IUCN officials working with the groups' Environmental Law Centre began to draft a possible international convention on biodiversity protection based on the need to "conserve biodiversity at the genetic, species and ecosystem levels" and including "a funding mechanism to alleviate the inequality of the conservation burden between the North and the South." In the mid-1980s, the IUCN collaborated with the World Resources Institute, the UNEP, the World Bank, and other international institutions to produce a series of influential publications on biodiversity.[17] Many NGOs also participated in innovative "debt-for-nature" swaps to purchase developing nations' debt in exchange for the expansion of domestic environmental programs.[18]

[16] Ibid.

[17] See Jeffrey A. McNeely, "Conserving Biological Diversity: A Decision-Maker's Guide," *IUCN Bulletin*, Vol. 20, N. 4–6 (April/June 1989), 6–7; Martin Holdgate, *The Green Web: A Union for World Conservation* (London: Earthscan Publications, Ltd., 1999), 214. The IIED took a major interest in sustainable tropical forest management, with its program led by two veterans of the WCS drafting and implementation process – Duncan Poore and Stephen Bass. See Duncan Poore and Stephen Bass, "Forestry and land use," in Cross, ed., *Evidence for Hope*, 77–95.

[18] On debt-for-nature swaps, see Cord Jakobeit, "Nonstate Actors Leading the Way: Debt-for-Nature Swaps," in Robert O. Keohane and Marc A. Levy, eds., *Institutions for*