

A Glance at Universal Environmental Movement¹²⁹

The environmental movement might be said to have begun centuries ago as a response to industrialization. In the nineteenth century, the British Romantic Poets extolled the beauties of nature while American writer Henry David Thoreau praised the return to a simpler life, guided by the values implicit in nature. It was a dichotomy that continued well into the twentieth century.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the rise of the nuclear age introduced fears of a new kind of pollution from deadly radiation. The environmental movement gained new momentum in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's book "The Silent Spring", which warned about the agricultural use of synthetic chemical pesticides. Ms. Carson, a scientist and writer, stressed the need to respect the ecosystem in which we live, in order to protect human health as well as the environment.

In 1969, the first, iconic photos of the Earth from outer space touched the hearts of humanity with its simplicity and beauty. Seeing, for the first time, this "big blue marble" in an immense galaxy brought home to many that we live on One Earth— a fragile interdependent ecosystem. And our responsibility to protect the health and well-being of that ecosystem began to dawn on the collective consciousness of the world.

With the ending of the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, its highest ideals and visions began to be translated into practical form. Among these was the

129. This article is quoted here from the website of the United Nations in order to let the readers know when mankind started to pay attention to the environment and whether religious outlooks can compare with that of man's today. <https://www.un.org/en/globalissues/environment>

environmental vision— now, quite literally, a global phenomenon. As universal concern about the healthy and sustainable use of the planet and its resources continued to grow, the UN, in 1972, convened the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm.

It was a landmark event and its final Declaration contains 19 principles that represent an environmental manifesto for our times. In addressing the need “to inspire and guide the peoples of the world in the preservation and enhancement of the human environment”, it laid the groundwork for the new environmental agenda of the United Nations system.

“A point has been reached in history when we must shape our actions throughout the world with a more prudent care for their environmental consequences. Through ignorance or indifference, we can do massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment on which our life and well being depend. Conversely, through fuller knowledge and wiser action, we can achieve for ourselves and our posterity a better life in an environment more in keeping with human needs and hopes...”

“To defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations has become an imperative goal for mankind.”

From the Declaration of the UN Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972), para. 6

Picking up on the energy generated by the Conference, the General Assembly, in December 1972, established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which leads the efforts of the United Nations family on behalf of the global environment. Its current priorities are environmental aspects of disasters and conflicts, ecosystem management, environmental governance, harmful substances, resource efficiency, and climate change.

In 1983, the Secretary-General of the United Nations invited Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, a medical doctor, master of public health and former Prime Minister of Norway, to establish and chair a World Commission on Environment and Development.

Dr. Brundtland was a natural choice for this timely role, as her vision of health had long extended beyond the confines of the medical world into environmental issues and human development. In April 1987, the Brundtland Commission, as it came to be known, published its groundbreaking report, “Our Common Future”— which brought the concept of sustainable development into the public discourse.

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

“A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises. ... Sustainable development requires that societies meet human needs both by increasing productive potential and by ensuring equitable opportunities for all.”

“Many of us live beyond the world's ecological means, for instance in our patterns of energy use. ...At a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings.”

“In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.”

“From the Brundtland Report, “Our Common Future”

The wide-ranging recommendations made by the Commission led directly to the holding of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which placed the issue squarely on the public agenda in a way it had never been before. Meeting in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, the “Earth Summit”, as it came to be known, adopted its “Agenda 21”, a blueprint for the protection of our planet and its sustainable development.

Agenda 21, represented the culmination of two decades of focused attention, which began with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm in 1972. Based on its conclusions, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) was created, to become the world's leading environmental agency. By 1992, the link between environment and development, and the imperative need for sustainable development was seen and recognized worldwide.

In Agenda 21, governments outlined a detailed blueprint for action that could move the world away from its present unsustainable model of economic growth towards activities that will protect and renew the environmental resources on which growth and development depend. Areas for action included: protecting the atmosphere; combating deforestation, soil loss and desertification; preventing air and water pollution; halting the depletion of fish stocks; and promoting the safe management of toxic wastes.

But Agenda 21 went beyond these purely environmental issues to address patterns of development which cause stress to the environment. These included: poverty and external debt in developing countries; unsustainable patterns of production and consumption; demographic stress; and the structure of the international economy. The action programme also recommended ways to strengthen the part played by major groups— women, trade unions, farmers, children and young people, indigenous peoples, the scientific community, local authorities, business, industry and NGOs— in achieving sustainable development.

To ensure full support for the goals of Agenda 21, the General Assembly in 1992 established the Commission on Sustainable Development, as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council.

The Earth Summit also led to the adoption of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa (1994). In 1994, a Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, held in Barbados, adopted a Programme of Action that set forth policies, actions and measures at all levels to promote sustainable development for these states.

In what was called the “Earth Summit +5”, the General Assembly held a special session in 1997 to review and appraise the implementation of Agenda 21, and make recommendations for its further fulfillment. The session’s final document recommended the adoption of legally binding targets to reduce emission of greenhouse gases leading to climate change; moving more forcefully towards sustainable patterns of energy production, distribution and use; and focusing on poverty eradication as a prerequisite for sustainable development.

The principles of sustainable development have been implicit in many UN conferences, including: the Second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Istanbul, 1996); the Special Session of the General Assembly on Small Island Developing States (New York, 1999); the Millennium Summit (New York, 2000) and its Millennium Development Goals (Goal 7 seeks to “Ensure Environmental Sustainability”); and the 2005 World Summit.

In 1988, UNEP and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) came together to create the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which has become the pre-eminent global source for scientific information relating to climate change. The main international instrument on this subject, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

(UNFCCC) was adopted in 1992. And its Kyoto Protocol, which sets binding targets for 37 industrialized countries and the European community for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, was adopted in 1997.

In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26 August to 4 September 2002, to take stock of achievements, challenges and new issues arising since the 1992 Earth Summit. It was an “implementation” Summit, designed to turn the goals, promises and commitments of Agenda 21 into concrete, tangible actions.

Member states agreed to the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and a Plan of Implementation detailing the priorities for action. The Division for Sustainable Development of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs – which provides the secretariat for the Commission on Sustainable Development, and was already engaging in monitoring implementation of Agenda 21 and the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States – began doing the same with regard to the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

In January 2005, the international community met at Mauritius to conduct a 10-year United Nations review of the Barbados Programme, approving a wide-ranging set of specific recommendations for its further implementation. The Mauritius Strategy addresses such issues as climate change and rising sea levels; natural and environmental disasters; management of wastes; coastal, marine, freshwater, land, energy, tourism and biodiversity resources; transportation and communication; science and technology; globalization and trade liberalization; sustainable production and consumption, capacity development, and education for sustainable development; health; culture; knowledge management and information for decision-making.

At the Earth Summit, it was agreed that most financing for Agenda 21 would come from within each country’s public and private sectors. However, new and additional external funds were deemed necessary to support developing countries’ efforts to implement sustainable development practices and protect the global environment.

Addressing this need, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) was established in 1991 to help developing countries fund projects that protect the global environment and promote sustainable livelihoods in local communities. It has provided \$8.8 billion in grants and generated over \$38.7 billion in co-financing from recipient governments, international development agencies,

private industry and NGOs, to support more than 2,400 projects in more than 165 developing countries and economies in transition. – It has also made more than 10,000 small grants directly to nongovernmental and community organizations.

GEF projects— principally carried out by UNDP, UNEP and the World Bank — conserve and make sustainable use of biological diversity, address global climate change, reverse the degradation of international waters, phase out substances that deplete the ozone layer, combat land degradation and drought, and reduce and eliminate the production and use of certain persistent organic pollutants.

To help advance the cause of sustainable development in a continuous fashion, the General Assembly also declared the period 2005-2014 as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The Decade, for which the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is the lead agency, aims to help people to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future, and to act upon those decisions.

The list of UN bodies active in support of the environment and sustainable development includes the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The UN Global Compact engages the international business community in the observance of environmental principles, and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), a World Bank-UNDP-UNEP initiative, helps to fund it all.

In view of the crucial importance of the environmental perspective and the principle of sustainability, the General Assembly has declared a number of observances to catalyze positive action worldwide.

Among those currently in effect are the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2015-2014), and the International Decade for Action, “Water for Life”, which began on 22 March 2005. In addition, the world community will observe the International Year of Natural Fibres in 2009, the International Year of Biodiversity in 2010, and the International Year of Forests in 2011.

Annual environment-related observances declared by the Assembly also include World Water Day (22 March), the International Day for Biological Diversity (22 May), World Environment Day (5 June), World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought (17 June), International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer (16 September), International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict (6 November), and International Mountain Day (11 December).