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**Noah's Ark or Jesus's Cross?  
UNCED as a Tale of Two Cities  
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*Whenever We sent a Warner to a community, the wealthy among them said, "We do not believe in your Message". They said "We have more in wealth and in children, and we will not be chastised". Al-Qur'an, XXXIV: 34-5*



# Noah's Ark or Jesus's Cross? UNCED as a Tale of Two Cities<sup>1</sup>

Tariq Banuri

## Abstract

*This paper looks at the various perspectives and experiences brought together at UNCED. The focus of the analysis is on differences in perceptions between the North and the South, as exhibited in the four "sites" of UNCED: intergovernmental negotiations, the NGO *mela* (festival or fair), the exercise in adult education through the mass media, and a forum for the exercise of political leadership. The argument is that while the first three events were successful, the fourth was a total failure. As a result, while the process help identify and consolidate national positions, it did not make progress towards creation of a political or moral community, without which global collective action is inconceivable.*

When Chou En Lai was asked what he thought the effect of the French Revolution had been on world history, he replied, "[I]t is too early to tell." UNCED may not be in the same class as the French revolution (although many hoped that it would be a major turning point in our history) but even in its case three months are hardly sufficient to assess its impact. Nevertheless, now that it has come and gone we can at least begin to unravel its strands without fear of prejudicing the most immediate outcome.

UNCED can be approached from two different though inter-related directions: from the contrasting *perspectives* with which the north and the south, NGOs as well as governments, approached the event; or the various *processes* in which these participants and perspectives encountered each other.

## Perspectives on UNCED

UNCED is a tale of two cities. The north and the south, both government functionaries and NGO activists, entered the event with widely divergent perspectives, not only because of conflicts over economic or political interests, important as they are, but more importantly due to conflicts over meanings (on the larger issue of conflict over meanings, see Banuri 1990a, 1990b). The same event appears different from the two perspectives--as though people sitting in the same theatre were to be seeing two different movies.

Whereas most northerners see UNCED as the very welcome unfolding of collective action to save humanity, many southerners, government functionaries as well as NGO activists (albeit for different reasons), fear in it the emergence of a new imperialism, of new conditionalities, and of new obstacles to the alleviation of poverty and oppression. Northerners have lined up to take part in a movie of Noah building an ark to defend us against the deluge. But the south does not seem to belong in this story; it is in a theatre on the other side of the railroad tracks, where Jesus is being crucified to save humanity,

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1. This article has been published in *Global Ecology*, edited by Wolfgang Sachs, 1993, by Zed Books, and also in *Review* Vol. XIII Number 2, Spring 1994.

where the poor have to suffer in their poverty so that the rich can enjoy their life style. As a result, the meaning and significance of every building block of UNCED, be it a political statement, a working paper or an inter-governmental treaty can be apprehended only within its particular context. Let us not forget that the symbolism of a log of wood too depends not only on its shape and material but also on the story in which it figures, on whether in the end it will bear the weight of Jesus or Noah.

But UNCED is a tale of two cities in more ways than one. What for government officials was yet another process of inter-governmental negotiation, was for NGOs an occasion for networking and lobbying, for journalists a good story, for academics a paradoxical combination of folly and wisdom, for political leaders and celebrities a photo opportunity, for environment ministries a chance to establish themselves at home as serious players, for foreign ministries another threat from ubiquitous global conspiracies against the national interest, for environmentalists hope and for developmentalists danger. Lastly, direct participants and distant observers seem to have experienced the event differently; and those who would hasten to conclude that former's account must be more authentic should do well to keep in mind the old Russian saying "He lies like an eye witness".

## North versus South

One point has to be made very clear. When we talk of the differences between the north and the south, we do not mean to imply that the one is more committed to the environment than the other. Rather, we refer to the fact that the right to "own" UNCED has somehow devolved to the north and not the south. Here, perceptions become important, as much as power.

Juan Martinez-Alier prefaces his justly acclaimed book, *Ecological Economics* with a quote from Gunnar Myrdal from a conference in 1968: "I have no doubt that within the next five or ten years we are going to have a popular movement within the rich countries which is going to press Congress and the Administration to do many things for solving environmental problems. But the same will not be true in most, if not all, underdeveloped countries" (Myrdal 1968, quoted in Martinez-Alier 1987: x). Martinez-Alier goes on to make two very important points. First, that although it would appear that Myrdal was right, this is not because ecology is a stronger force in the north than in the south, but because the latter is at a disadvantage in defining the international agenda. Second, the ability of the north to define the international agenda involves, *inter alia* an attempt to move the agenda away from the issue that the German geographer, Ernst Friedrich (b. 1867), called *Raubwirtschaft*, namely the fact that environmental damage is caused primarily by the rich and not the poor. As Friedrich puts it, "it seems particularly strange that characteristic devastation with all its grave consequences should especially accompany civilisation, while primitive folk know only milder forms of it" (quoted in Martinez-Alier 1987: xvii). The UNCED process reflects both issues raised by Martinez-Alier.

## More Environmental Than Thou

It is paradoxical that the north is viewed as being more conscious and respectful of environmental limits than the south, when all available evidence shows that the environmental crisis has been precipitated almost exclusively by the wasteful and excessive consumption in the north. Indeed, roughly 80 per cent of the resources of the planet as well as its sinks are being utilized by the 20 per cent of the population

that lives in Europe, North America, Oceania, and Japan (see Parikh, et al 1991). If the south were to disappear tomorrow, the environmental crisis would be still with us, but not if the north were to disappear.

Notwithstanding all this, the perception of the north being more environmentally conscious is important. It has helped engender the belief that the north alone is capable of building Noah's ark to save us from the environmental crisis. As mentioned, Martinez-Alier has argued that this is a mistaken perception, that there are ecological roots and ecological contents in social movements by poor populations, in history as well as at present, and finally that ecology is potentially a stronger force in the south than in the north. He calls southern egalitarian ecology "ecological narodnism" or, following Ram Guha (1988) "ecological socialism". There is also an extensive literature documenting the environmental content of traditional systems of knowledge and indeed their superiority in this respect over the modern system of knowledge (e.g., see Banuri and Apffel Marglin 1993).

The tendency to disregard or slight the environmental movements in southern countries is best illustrated by a counter-example, that of probably the best known environmental movement in the world, the *Chipko* movement in India. As is now well known, *Chipko* began with the protest of a few village women against the cutting of trees in their area (for details, see Guha 1993). Had it not been for the interest taken by a number of enterprising journalists, *more than three years after the event*, the incident would at best have been written off as just another act of civil disobedience by villagers to protect their pecuniary interests. In the event the publicity received by the action helped galvanise the movement and transform it into a national effort for environmental conservation, indeed for a redefinition (according to Guha 1993) of the very notion of development.

On the other hand, looking only at the number of movements explicitly committed to an environmental agenda in northern countries tends to overstate their influence and spread. These groups have not been able to enter the mainstream of political action anywhere in the north; and their ability to influence the mainstream political agenda remains limited and derivative of sensational events. For example, in Sweden, one of the most environmentally sensitive countries, the green party was able to enter the parliament in elections held in the aftermath of Chernobyl, but was ousted in the subsequent polls. Finally, no political party anywhere in the north seems willing to risk its electoral future by advocating policies that would help restrain consumption or reduce the growth rate. In other words, the supposedly higher concern for the environment in northern countries merits a closer look, and may indeed only be rhetorical in character (see also Banuri and Apffel Marglin 1993).

Recently, this argument received inadvertent support from an opinion poll of attitudes towards the environment and economic growth. The poll was conducted by the Gallup Institute in June 1992 to coincide with UNCED (see Dunlap, Gallup and Gallup 1992). It does not find significant differences between the north and the south on the level of environmental concern.<sup>2</sup> It also discovers that, except in Korea, a far larger proportion of people see the north rather than the south to be "solely responsible" for global environmental problems (although a plurality in 13 out of 22 countries held both north and south to be "equally responsible"); and most interestingly, that people from southern countries were just as likely to claim being active in the environmental movement or to have voted or worked for a candidate because of the latter's position on environmental issues. Indeed, the two countries where the highest

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2. Respondents in Latin American countries showed somewhat higher levels of concern, but that is probably due to the greater exposure to and pride in a global event taking place on the continent.

proportion of the sample claimed to be active in the environmental movement were the Philippines (42 per cent) and India (18 per cent).

Unfortunately, the pollsters failed to ask people to guess the results of the poll. My hunch is that a vast majority, in the south as well as the north, would have guessed, as Myrdal did a quarter century ago, that a greater proportion of northerners is concerned and active on environmental issues.

Be that as it may, the misperception is important. For one, it explains the common view that the environment is a northern issue, imposed on a reluctant south against its will. Second, it has led to a view that the UNCED process is "owned" by the north, that it is a northern initiative, driven and dominated by northern concerns, and that its success is the north's responsibility. Even southern governments and NGOs seemed to believe this and to act as though they were but guests at the event. As a result, their strategy became almost entirely reactive in character.

### ***Raubwirtschaft*, or Who Owns UNCED?**

A more concrete result is that although the UNCED agenda derives overtly from the shared global predicament, it is responsive primarily to northern concerns and views. Indeed, Martinez-Alier's claim that the wealthy seek to move the agenda away from the issue of *Raubwirtschaft* is vindicated by the omission of consumption and life-styles, debt and trade, or the nature of governance from the discussions, and the obsession with population growth as the key to environmental degradation.

There is probably no controversy that the environmental crisis represents an intolerable level of pressure, caused by unsustainable levels of human consumption, on finite natural resources; and therefore that environmental sustainability requires a change in behaviour patterns, in particular a reduction in overall consumption of energy, minerals and biomass. Controversies and differences arise in the elaboration. Reduction in consumption can be brought about either through the alteration of the resource intensive life-style of richer countries, or through reductions in the consumption and/or the population of poor countries. While both sides (understandably) wish to avoid adjustments difficult for their people, the success of the north lies in its ability to set the agenda in a manner that would rule out the unacceptable option altogether.

A major factor in this success is the bracketing together of global and local resources. Here, the former term includes the atmosphere (and to a certain extent the oceans), which have been degraded through over-use because no one was responsible for them; and the latter covers say, forests or minerals, where degradation occurred in large part because those who had been responsible historically were dispossessed through a gradual process of colonialism, development and nation building. In the one case, the need is to establish a system of global governance in order to restrain those who over-used the commons; while in the other case, the need is the opposite--to establish local governance and to strengthen historic users in order that they may re-assume the responsibility of their local environment. The confusion of local and global resources obscures the fact, argued elegantly by Lipietz (1992), that UNCED is after all an "enclosures movement" to allocate rights to the global commons.

The north seems to be saying that global commons have to be allocated on the basis of historic use, and local commons on the basis of ability to manage "rationally". Not surprisingly, both formulations favour the north. Southern interest, however, would have been served better if discussions of global commons

employed the principles of justice and equity in the allocation of rights, historically as well as contemporaneously. But it is not really a question of partisan interests. Justice and equity are necessary conditions for the inculcation of the value of restraint, and without restraint the environmental crisis will not be averted. Likewise, the allocation of rights to local resources on the basis of historical experience and responsibility not only favours the south generally, but also local over national interests within the south; more importantly, by allowing the emergence of an empathetic as opposed to an instrumental view of nature, it can allow a conservationist ethic to take root (see Banuri and Apffel Marglin 1993).

Underlying the conflict over interests is also a conflict over language. The interests of the rich are served by the language of inertia--of national interest, foreign aid, financial transfers and business as usual--while the poor will benefit from the language of transformations and turning points--property rights, global commons, conditionalities (on the north), global interdependence, and global governance. UNCED discussions from the very outset has been dominated by the former language. Alternative languages crept into both UNCED and domestic political agendas in the south only incidentally and indirectly because of the actions of a few NGOs.

For example, on global warming UNCED spent all its time debating whether industrialised countries, particularly the US, would agree to reduce greenhouse emissions to the 1990 level by the year 2000. The implicit assumption, that the 1990 level is somehow "normal", is scarcely a ground for hope. A more appropriate approach for the south, as articulated in the well known critique of the World Resources Institute (WRI), Washington by Agarwal and Narain (1991) of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), New Delhi, would have been to ask for an equitable division of the tolerable level of emissions of greenhouse gases by the world population.

Similarly, in the language of inertia issues become abstract and disembedded from their contexts. Population growth and poverty became the primary causes of environmental degradation, allowing decision makers to slip into complacency that the solutions to the problems are known, needing only more money and more technical assistance. The point is not that these are not problems, nor that they are unconnected to the environment, but that attempts to address them without looking at the larger problem of inequity, injustice, and illegitimacy, or without trying to understand the causes of the failure of earlier innumerable solutions are at best quixotic and at worst injurious.

All this is not to assert, however, that southern governments were passive in the discussions. Far from it; they were united in accusing the north of precipitating the environmental crisis; but they used the confrontation not to bring about a change in underlying structural conditions, but to place moral pressure on the north to induce it to increase the level of financial transfers, provide technical and other assistance to facilitate the shift to sustainability even in local contexts, and forswear any moves towards the imposition of fresh conditionalities.

The result is that what began as a dialogue quickly degenerated into unconnected monologues, one side intent upon saving the planet for everyone, and the other equally determined not to be sacrificed in the process of collective salvation.

## Environment and Development

The positions taken by southern governments in UNCED discussions cannot be understood without reference to the vision of an unending and expanding frontier that underlies their development policies (see Banuri and Holmberg 1992). Resource constraints have almost never been important in this vision. The belief was that these constraints could always be overcome by better technology and organization--for example, by replacing green revolution technology with biotechnology. The need for restraining consumption in the north (or in the elite sections of the south) has nowhere been taken seriously.

The Malaysian example is instructive in this regard. In recent planning documents, the explicit objective of economic strategy is stated to be that when (not if) natural resources run out, the country should have a sufficient industrial and technological base to maintain its high standard of living (see Hurst 1990). This reflects an unconscious reliance on the model of growth and development provided by European countries, where for every unit of biomass produced locally a multiple is imported from other, mainly southern countries. The environmental crisis has been engendered precisely by the replication of this model around the globe.

In other words, the prevailing vision of development is based on the ability to access biomass either through political means or through better organisation and technology. In earlier days the political means went by the name of colonialism; today, they are subsumed under the widely accepted superiority of the national over local interests. However, whether the means are political or economic, the assumption is that there exists a biomass-rich "hinterland" that could be tapped to finance the development of the growing sector of the economy. Where such a hinterland does not exist, as in desert regions (e.g., Central Africa) or in densely populated countries (e.g., Bangladesh) one senses a certain despair about developmental prospects.

The ubiquitous and hegemonic nature of this vision makes it clear why cynics in southern countries are entirely justified--that the environment is a ruse through which northern countries wish to halt the south's economic development. The north wants the south not to base its development on the replacement of indigenous with imported biomass. But this needs an altogether different model of development, and one that the north still does not appear to be willing to introduce in its own midst.

An associated factor here is the debt of history. In many places, the residual influence of the colonial history includes the replication of colonial relationships in post-colonial societies, thus supporting Ashis Nandy's (1982) contention that the colonized seeks inevitably to become like the colonizer. Post-colonial governments and elites invariably saw economically backward and/or biologically rich regions and their inhabitants--aboriginal tribes, rural populations, or culturally non-cosmopolitan segments of societies--as colonies to be exploited for the "national" benefit. There are striking similarities in the attitude of the Malaysian elites towards North Borneo, of the pre-1971 Pakistani elite towards East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), of the Indonesians towards East Timor, and of the Thai state initially towards its own rural citizens and rural areas, and increasingly towards neighboring "hinterland" regions (Banuri 1992). The export of colonial relations to a hinterland is particularly significant; as Thai citizens protest against unwise development projects, the Thai state finds it less costly (politically or economically) to persuade

neighboring states to undertake them and to treat *their* citizens in a manner that Thailand can longer treat its own.<sup>3</sup>

Among other consequences, this vision of development produced a supporting system of centralized political rule in socialist as well as "developing" societies, the inter-related myths of the nation state and the national interest, and the degradation and outright hostility to local institutions, especially participatory ones. Another result is the low pricing of natural resources, especially of common resources such as forests; this again was the most extreme in the former Soviet Union, where natural resources were supposed to have a zero price (over and above the labor costs of exploitation), but others were not far behind (see Kollontai 1992). Lastly, and of most relevance to this discussion, it led southern governments to acquiesce in the agenda framed by the north, being the only way in which the continuation of the development project could be justified.

As Goodland, *et al* (1991) have argued, the prevailing growth model in the 20th century has been based on the assumption of an "empty world", i.e., one where natural capital and human-made capital are substitutes, and where the natural resource frontier is expanding. In this model it makes sense to run down your natural capital in order to build up your human-made capital, thus shifting from a biomass-based economy to an industrial-technological economy. However, we are increasingly finding ourselves in a "full world", i.e. where natural capital and human-made capital are complements, and where the natural resource frontier is shrinking. Here, running down natural capital is counter-productive because then human-made capital would run out of natural resources to process. Thus, for example in the initial stages it may make economic sense to sell your trees to set up sawmills, but when you start running out of trees, your sawmills would have nothing to work with.

In fact, the environmental message is that at the global level we have already entered a full world, i.e. one with a shrinking frontier. Therefore, we have to start living within our means. This, however, would not be possible unless every country is willing to live within its means, in other words if every country were willing to accept the fact that it has a shrinking frontier. This is why it makes sense to tell Malaysia and Indonesia that they cannot deplete their forests any further. They have to behave as if they have already run out of forests to deplete. However, Malaysia is correct in asserting that such restraint should begin in the north, which has been living beyond its means for over two centuries.

Moreover, and this is the implicit message of most southern countries, if they are no longer allowed to deplete their natural capital to finance development, they will not be able to finance it unless they had access to other types of resources, namely financial transfers and technical assistance from the north.

## Languages within Languages

However, we should not give the impression that every southern government came to UNCED with the same concerns and hopes. The belief in the vision of development was itself conditioned by geography, resource endowment, and the nature of the political system. In particular, decision makers are affected by whether they live in a world with an *expanding frontier* or one with a *shrinking frontier*. An expanding

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3. Such an export has interesting parallels in recent history. If US citizens will not allow their civil liberties and democratic rights to be undermined in order to protect American children from the evil effect of narcotics, the US can and does export violence to other countries by bribing the Bolivian, the Pakistani, the Panamanian or other states to undermine the even more minimal civil liberties of their citizens.

frontier will tend to reduce the willingness to compromise other objectives in the interest of environmental health, while a shrinking frontier is likely to make a country more open to a conservationist message.

Countries like Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore or Thailand which belong to the former world are perceived to have expanding possibilities for the growth of income and wealth. In Indonesia and Malaysia, it is because idle natural resources are believed to be available and exploitable for financing growth. Singapore and Korea, like industrialized countries (e.g., Japan), feel that they can access natural resources from other countries through trade, i.e. through economic means.<sup>4</sup> In Thailand, this confidence derives increasingly not from the country's own resource endowment but from that of neighbouring countries (Myanmar, Kumpachea, Laos). As long as Thailand can assert the superiority of a "regional interest" over local interests, it can control natural resources in its hinterland directly.

Other countries (e.g. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) are not so fortunate. They are beginning to see a *shrinking frontier*, i.e. a growing set of limitations on growth because of resource constraints. In Pakistan, for example, four decades of development were made possible by dramatic increases in water and land. But now there is no more water and no more land, and further growth will have to be based upon a static resource base. These countries have not reached the point where they could access natural resources through trade alone.

A second set of reasons that has influenced the attitude of countries towards UNCED discussions is their relationship to the emerging global environmental crisis. Some countries are *concerned* (Bangladesh, Maldives) because they are clearly affected by global degradation. Others are *defiant* because they have been singled out as major contributors to global degradation (China, India, Japan, Malaysia). Besides this, however, most countries began the day as *indifferent* to UNCED. This is in part because they were neither accused of contributing significantly to the global environmental crisis nor felt exclusively threatened by it.

Another group of countries that responded most energetically to UNCED discussions were those that saw themselves as being unfairly targeted in northern analyses and declarations on one or more UNCED issues. Malaysia took on the forestry issue because it had been identified as the most significant destroyer of tropical forests; China and India began to cooperate because of northern descriptions that identified them (mainly because of their size) as major polluters, even though on a per capita basis they were much less responsible than even middle income countries. On the other side, industrialized countries, aware of accusations that their excessive consumption was responsible for the environmental crisis, repeatedly assert the environmentally benign impact of their own consumption and industry, assertion that are often challenged by their own NGOs. This is unlike southern NGOs, which support their governments on the issue of unfair accusation even when they oppose them on virtually everything else.

A third set of factors that influences attitudes along the axis of concern and defiance is the bargaining power of a country in the community of nations. Bargaining power is the opposite of conditionality; a country has bargaining power if the community of nations cannot impose conditionalities on it. In general, bargaining power depends on size, potential for pollution, expected growth, geopolitical situation and financial independence.

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4. In Japan's case, it is actually a combination of economic and political means, since the actions of Japanese corporations involves some degree of political control of the host countries.

China and India are large countries, and cannot be ignored or even brow-beaten publicly; both are major emitters of greenhouse gases (because of their size and coal-based economies); and they are relatively independent financially. Both are therefore more independent than, say, Pakistan with its large debt burden, but since Chinese growth prospects are better, it is in a far stronger geopolitical situation than India. Similarly, East Asian countries have a high degree of bargaining power because of their virtual economic independence.

## **NGOs and the Democratic Space**

Another factor that has strongly influenced governments' perception of environment and development, and through it their approach to UNCED discussions, is the role of NGOs. The key determinant of the existence, strength, and orientation of NGOs is what Korten (1990) has called the "democratic space" in a country.

While non-governmental organizations have always existed, *Non-Governmental Organizations* are a recent phenomenon. They have emerged in many countries as an alternative to organized political activity. As such, they reflect a revision to the common view in which the civil society inter-acts with the state only through political parties. They are also a variation on the tradition of civic protest in the sense that many NGOs have been oriented not towards the state but rather towards the community itself. Third, they are often seen not as lobbying groups but rather as influence groups that work through persuasion and consensus. Fourth, many NGOs operate at grassroots levels, where not only do they have access to different types and quality of information than the state, but they have also developed an alternative view of development.

NGOs, both northern and southern, have gradually made their presence felt, indirectly (by pressuring their governments), and directly (by participating in discussions). The effectiveness of a particular NGO depends on its organizational strength, financial solvency and analytical capacity, as well as the democratic space in its own country or in the global forum. The UNCED Secretariat has made considerable efforts to create such a space at the global level, and this has in turn opened up the space in individual countries. NGOs are important partly because they can say things a government cannot, partly because of their access to information at the micro level (which is often not available to governments or international agencies), and perhaps most importantly because they have begun to articulate a genuinely alternative vision of development, one which is compatible with the new constraints (e.g., see Agarwal and Narain 1989, Husain 1990, Guha 1993, PER 1991). As a result, it is possible for them to speak with a greater degree of self-confidence with northern governments and NGOs than do the southern governments.

In those countries of the south where NGO activity is minimal (e.g., China, Korea, Singapore), governments have often tended to be defensive and secretive about environmental problems, and therefore reluctant to promote awareness of environmental issues. In many countries (e.g., India) environmental problems were brought to light by active and vigorous NGOs. This has led to a more vigorous stand on global environmental issues.

Similarly, the openness of the government to advice and dialogue with NGOs and other institutions of the civil society depends also on the strength and ability of research institutions outside the government. Where research and analysis is almost entirely controlled or dominated by the state (as in China,

Singapore), NGOs are at a disadvantage in the dialogue. Where (as in India), the government's ability to analyze has weakened over time, and civic groups have become increasingly organized, a certain degree of equality is introduced into the picture. Lastly, where the services of non-governmental research institutions are available to NGOs as well as to other private groups, they can base their arguments on analysis of a high quality. This depends partly on the efficiency of the government departments entrusted with the responsibility, and partly on the existence of effective independent research institutions.

In general, southern NGOs seem to use the UNCED process to fight domestic issues domestically rather than to intervene in global partnership questions. The outstanding exception to this trend are the Centre for Science and Environment and the World Rainforest Movement, which have taken up the north-south issue centrally in global discussions (see Agarwal and Narain 1991, Khor 1991).

While southern NGOs, such as the Centre for Science and Environment, India, or the World Rainforest Movement, Malaysia have supported the demand for additional financial transfers (and even provided concrete suggestions on how this could be done), their concentration is on how the resources would be allocated internally. Thus, they demand a transformation of domestic governance into a decentralised and participatory one. In addition, they also seek to establish the basis of global governance on a new set of parameters, including a dramatic transformation in the nature of the aid relationship. Needless to say, these views are not very welcome in the north.

NGOs have also been less concerned about conditionality than their governments. This is not only because they can afford to be casual about it. A major reason is that they see the basis of existing conditionalities to be the ineffectiveness of centralised governmental action. In other words, they see most conditionalities emerging on the one hand because of the corruption, inefficiency and incompetence of governments, and on the other hand because of their illegitimate and non-representative nature. Because of this governments need to be coaxed into performing socially desirable tasks. An alternative, decentralized, vision of society, one based on the centrality of the civil society rather than the state, would not have this problem. In this alternative vision, desirable social goals would be decided not by expatriate consultants but by the society itself through decentralised and participatory collective institutions.

However, while NGOs were generally more responsible and more committed to the resolution of problems, their perception of global problems was also (naturally) coloured by their national or regional contexts. This is meant not as a simplistic statement that NGOs were partisans of their national interests--which they often were--but also and more importantly that they viewed their own experiences as definitive, not only for themselves but also for others from very different backgrounds. Given the self-righteousness of NGO activists, this often made a cross-country dialogue between NGOs more difficult than that between governments or between NGOs and governments. It is perhaps in recognition of this point that Gustavo Esteva, a well known social activist from Mexico, called NGOs the last frontier of arrogance.

To the extent that there is concern over global partnership questions, there is a potential for conflict between northern and southern NGOs. Some of the latter have expressed the view that besides some rhetoric on institutions, the former do not press their governments strongly enough on north-south issues, such as consumption or energy. The participation of southern NGOs in UNCED discussions has also been limited not only by financial constraints, but also by the fact that most southern NGOs are not the "writing" type. Many southern NGOs are invited into the process by northern NGOs, which changes their

role somewhat. A majority of southern NGOs are development NGOs and not environmental NGOs; hence they have been more interested in cross cutting issues, such as finance or technology.

## **The Processes of UNCED**

In the first section we looked at the various perspectives that participants in UNCED brought to bear upon the process. But just as UNCED does not represent a single vision of environment or development, it does not represent a single, monolithic process either. Indeed, UNCED can be viewed as a collection of sites where people with different perspectives and different agendas encountered each other. Four sites are particularly salient, the mass media site, or the most expensive adult education exercise in history; something which is best described by the Urdu word *mela*--the closest English translation is festival, although *mela* is closer to the French meaning of festival, as something which is always in the collective public domain--which brought together NGOs, activists, writers, academics, and journalists from various countries; a site for inter-governmental diplomatic negotiations aimed at identifying and protecting national interests in the face of imminent changes; and a site for the articulation and evolution of leadership or vision required for global cooperation to combat the environmental crisis.

In Rio, these sites were physically distinct as well. The adult education exercise was conducted out of press briefing rooms, the offices and facilities of the local and international news media, and through the newspapers and TV screens around the globe. The negotiations were carried out in the assembly halls and smaller meeting halls of Riocentro, the *mela* took place in the Global Forum, and the leadership exercise was confined to the last two days of the conference.

Many people have commented on the anti-climatic nature of the UNCED summit. Although a number of protagonists have tried to put on a brave face, it is widely conceded that UNCED was a failure in terms of the high expectations that had become attached to it. Yet, it could be said that this failure was not monolithic either, since some processes succeeded in meeting or even exceeding whatever expectations could reasonably have been attached to them. The adult education programme was successful beyond expectations, and the negotiations process as well as the *mela* achieved exactly what they had set out to achieve. However, and this is the main reason for the disappointment and disillusion, the leadership exercise was a total failure. The massive disappointment accompanying the last days of the Rio conference was nothing but the recognition that the so-called global movement lacked both the vision and the leadership needed to face the future.

## **Negotiations and Conventions**

The main plank in UNCED was seen to be the bureaucratic one, namely the actual process of negotiation between government representatives that led to the elaborate conventions and agreements signed at the summit. The purpose of the diplomatic negotiations can be viewed as one of protecting the national interest of each country from the impact of imminent changes, both because of the environmental crisis, and from steps that the global community will take as a defence against the crisis. In other words, these negotiations can help chalk out the limited area of cooperation that would be available even if no country was willing to yield anything. It can be said that this process was fairly successful. The prolonged negotiations helped outline the very limited area of global cooperation that is still possible in an

uncooperative environment. While this does not get us very far, even the outlining of the area of agreement is useful.

The limited nature of the agreements are a testament not to the failure of the bureaucratic process, but to the absence of trust between various countries, particularly those of the north and the south. The former believed that the south was out to undermine their way of life, partly by asking for compensation for past and present threats posed by northern actions to the global environment, partly by insisting upon changes in northern consumption and lifestyles, and partly by refusing to protect the biological diversity that is necessary to sustain the high consumption of the north. Southern countries on the other hand seemed to believe that the north wished to take them for a ride, by attempting to take over control of southern natural resources, diverting resources away from poverty eradication and income expansion, and using every means possible to maintain the existing disparity in consumption levels. In this environment, both groups of countries were unwilling to agree on anything that posed the slightest threat, real or perceived, to their national interest, narrowly defined.

The initial position of southern countries in the UNCED process was indifferent and fragmented. Most countries did not view the issues as very relevant to their concerns. Environment was (and to a certain extent still is) seen by many governments as antithetical to development. Although several civic groups and NGOs articulated alternative views, they were generally treated rather cavalierly by governments and powerful elites. Interest was also limited by the scarcity of concrete knowledge about the possible impact of global changes on local living conditions and development prospects. More importantly there was and continues to be an enduring pessimism about the potential of a north-south dialogue on issues of global import. As a result, the governments of most southern countries entered into the discussions to pursue narrow parochial agendas--the most obvious one being that of seeking financial gains for themselves, rather than trying to influence the structural features of the situation.

By the third Prepcom, however, a number of regional discussions and agreements (e.g., the ESCAP Ministerial Declaration, the Beijing Declaration, the Commonwealth Declaration) had helped bring these countries together, with the result that common themes began to emerge relatively forcefully. One reason for the emerging north-south divide is that the process of convergence of positions took place in forums whose composition did not cut across the north-south divide (or, even where it did, the representatives of the other group were not very vocal or effective--e.g., Japan at the ESCAP meetings). Be that as it may, the positions of Group of 77 (G77) countries and China were virtually identical by the time the preparation of National Reports for UNCED began in earnest in early 1991. Note that China is not a member of G77.

Yet, a number of issues have not been taken up forcefully by southern countries. First, the need to link the discussions in UNCED, UNCTAD and GATT. The south has more or less accepted the fact that these discussions take place in different forums, even though it hurts countries with limited financial, analytical and professional resources. Next, the ability to set the agenda has nowhere been visible; there has been no attempt to seek a binding convention on poverty, or on the global distribution of consumption, on debt, or on sharing the benefits of technology. Another issue on which the south's positions have not emerged sufficiently clearly is that of biodiversity. After raising the issues of biotechnology and the rights of local farmers in the gene pool, neither southern positions nor internal southern discussions have progressed very far. (In contrast for example, the discussions within southern countries over the climate change issue are far more detailed and sophisticated). Lastly, there does not appear to be a clear

recognition that UNCED is essentially a discussion of global property rights. Neither National Reports (with the exception of Pakistan's), nor the Beijing Declaration adequately recognize this point.

The Beijing Declaration focuses almost exclusively on the issue of north-south conflict of interest. It lays the blame for the global environmental crisis on the north, identifies poverty and basic needs as the fundamental questions facing the south, and emphasizes the importance of "new and additional resource flows" and "transfer of technology on concessional terms" to promote sustainable development in the south. With the exception of Japan and Singapore, the position of virtually all Asian countries at UNCED has been informed by the Beijing Declaration.

It is in large part because of the positions taken at the Beijing conference, and the strong advocacy and support of southern NGOs that UNCED ended up with conventions and agreements that clearly lay the blame for the environmental despoliation on the north. This kind of an agreement was inconceivable two years ago.

### **The Adult Education Exercise**

In Isaac Bashevis Singer's story, "Sabbath in Gehenna", the condemned of the earth talk among other things about starting a magazine, because "When you sign a petition the angels throw it away... But a magazine they would read. The righteous in paradise expire from boredom". Southern governments did not really understand the power of the media in UNCED. They kept presenting petitions, which the angels kept throwing away; but they never thought of starting a magazine.

However, the fact that the magazine was there affected outcomes far more than all the king's horses and all the king's men could have done. This very important role of the mass media needs to be highlighted in its own right. As Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland has put it, "The media is the mechanism". This was abundantly clear in the UNCED process, where the ability of the media to create a sense of a moral community was very important.

UNCED represents a transformation in thinking along a number of dimensions: on "development" which is gradually being transformed into "sustainable development"; on the concept of the global commons, which has become more concrete; on the nature of the global order, and on relationships between sovereign states; on the appropriate role of the UN and other international agencies; on trade and development; on governance and domestic issues of political economy; on the relationship between the state and civil society, and specifically between government departments and NGOs; and on the appropriate balance between decentralized and centralized decision making.

Through the mass media, UNCED managed to focus attention on the emerging environmental and developmental problems in a manner that was inconceivable even a few years ago. Part of the reason for this was the decision of the UNCED Secretariat to involve NGOs in discussions. NGOs helped create a "civil society" at the discussions, they managed to keep a check on diplomats from their own and even other countries, They were often better informed and more articulate than government representatives, they were better at obtaining and disseminating information than the journalists themselves, they also engaged themselves in writing and speaking openly and forcefully on the issues involved, and lastly they were also more capable of creating the drama which makes

good copy. For all of these reasons, the eyes of the world became focused on the event, and therefore on the ideas behind the event.

The effectiveness of the media may have also helped southern delegations disproportionately, since these delegations were often not in a position to access and digest the vast amount of material coming out of the conference. They were clearly assisted in process by the analytical capacity of the media. At Rio itself, the UNCED media brigade were generally favourably inclined towards environmentalist positions, and particularly towards southern positions. This was clearly not the case as far as the media in the countries themselves were concerned. For example, while the special UNCED newspapers were unanimously critical of George Bush's speech at the Rio summit, the US newspapers gave it a more favourable coverage.

## The NGO Mela

An element in the discussions is the expanding role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both in challenging their own governments in domestic forums, and in presenting alternative perspectives and alternative solutions in global discussions.

Besides acting as a grist for the mill of journalists, the NGO *mela* had other important functions. It enabled people from different countries and different organisations to meet with each other, to exchange notes, to learn about other activities in their field, to disagree often violently with each other, to buy and sell goods, artefacts, books and papers, and ideas, and to acquire the confidence to deal with their governments at home. At Rio itself, the process was somewhat diluted by the fact that the main NGO event, the Global Forum, was located 40 kilometres away from Riocentro, the site of the governmental conference. Thus, journalists or observers were forced to choose between the two events, to the detriment of the quality of both. However, like all *melas* or meetings of civil society institutions (e.g., Social Science Associations, Society of International Development), the NGO event too succeeded in whatever such events are supposed to accomplish.

However, the greater involvement of NGOs in the negotiations process has had some very positive fallouts. For one, as a leading activist put it, "Pity the leader who tells a lie", because their NGOs would be present to catch them at it. Second, it strengthened and gave teeth to the extremely visible and effective role played by the mass media. NGOs often provided the knowledge and information that gave the right leads to journalists. Third, it strengthened governmental ability and effectiveness too, because government delegations began to call upon their NGOs for assistance and support. This was especially so for southern countries, where government officials do not normally have the competent backup to keep abreast of the issues. In other words, fourth, it may have tilted the balance ever so slightly towards the normally weak southern delegations.

The NGO Forum, an initiative to draft alternative treaties on the various issues before UNCED (and a few additional ones), seemed to be too strongly dominated by northern NGOs; therefore, a few NGOs and individuals (mainly from Asian countries) tried to cooperate to introduce our perspectives and concerns into the debate. Specific issues addressed were those of poverty and environment, the role of consumption, and the issue of local rights, especially in forests.

## Leadership: A Failure of Vision

A major conclusion that emerges from this process of observation is that the so-called growing concern over global problems is mere rhetoric. The primary objective of government representatives seemed not to be the resolution of global problems but the protection of their countries from the costs of global environmental degradation as well global cleanup. This is probably the key reason why the region of agreement in UNCED was so limited in scope and consequence.

This brings us to the fact that the real failure of the conference was in the summit part, i.e. in the area of leadership. The environmental crisis requires a cooperative response, and cooperation becomes possible only when participants agree to place constraints on their behaviour and well-being, in other words if they are willing to sacrifice something in the short run. If every one responds positively, such sacrifices are beneficial to all, and are therefore not costly in the long run. But for this to happen, there is a need for leadership (or, to use the term in its old sense, "hegemony"). This was sorely missing from the conference. For a number of historical reasons, everyone expected the US to provide leadership by accepting restraints upon itself, and inviting others to respond positively. In the event, the US was the most laggard in responding. Europe was too concerned about its own internal unity to provide leadership. Nordic countries took a moral stance, but given that they too refused to do anything more than they were already doing, they too could not break ahead of the pack. Japan appears unwilling to assume the position so recently vacated by the US. An last but not the least, southern countries decided to take a reactive rather than a proactive position. The result was that the summit (though not the conference) became something of a farce.

Hegemony, in the Gramscian sense includes both the ability to bring people within a group together on one platform, and also to be able to forge alliances with other groups. Hegemony is partly a question of self-confidence. The governmental elites of only a small number of southern countries believe that they have the right to define moral and political questions in the international arena; others take the moral perspective of the industrialized world as the definitive framework for discussing global issues, and thus focus only on technical or financial concerns.

The greatest obstacle to the establishment of hegemony, in the above sense of the term, is an absence of trust between the north and the south. The global concerns that led to UNCED demanded global cooperation and global institutions. However, properly functioning and legitimate global institutions require the existence of a global political community--namely a community where individuals recognise their interdependence. It is fair to say that such a sense of community is absent even within many southern countries, let alone between southern and northern countries. More importantly, trust requires the existence of a global *moral* community--namely a sense of shared values of fairness and justice across the globe. This too does not exist at the global level, nor even in most national states.

The result is the absence of a sense of trust between the north and the south, without which it is impossible to arrive at agreements that call for cooperation, mutual sacrifice and inter-temporal as well as inter-regional redistribution.

The absence of trust is most evident whenever the issue of global consumption patterns is raised. The fact that there is a strong resistance against this issue in industrialized countries, including

Japan and Singapore, and that there is no significant social movement to bring down consumption levels in the north suggests that the reduction of northern consumption for maintaining global sustainability is not on the cards. Respectable initiatives in Japan (such as the Globe Economic Forum 1991) do not advocate a decline in consumption levels, and rely on moral suasion to bring about necessary changes. This must mean that people in northern countries must expect the south to provide the bulk of the adjustment to the crisis. In other words, it could be said that people of northern countries view their consumption as being morally superior to that of the people in the south. Clearly the south does not agree. As the Beijing Declaration points out, the UNCED agreement can only be based on the principle that basic and survival needs have priority over nonessential needs; in other words that the consumption of the poor is morally superior to that of the rich. The absence of a moral community means precisely that the two sides do not see eye to eye on this issue. Indeed, even within a southern country, the rich would probably view their own consumption as being superior to and therefore more in need of defence than the consumption of the poor in their own midst. The absence of a political community would be reflected in the fact that the rich do not see the political importance of providing a consumption floor for the poor, mainly because they do not perceive an interdependence between their own interests and those of the poor.

The absence of trust can lead in two different directions. Either, one can use it to argue for decentralized decision making, and for the gradual construction of global institutions. An alternative direction is for poor countries to abjure any interest in issues of global governance. In this case, there would be no interest for, say Indonesia, to suggest that all countries place constraints on their behaviour (of different sorts) in order to protect the globe. Because Indonesia would be justified in feeling that compliance with the agreement would be less than universal. The existing discussions have taken the second route.

This explains why southern countries in general and Asian countries in particular have not taken advantage of the opportunity provided by these discussions to tackle head on the need for global governance. On the contrary, their main effort has been to use the occasion to ensure guaranteed financial transfers from the north, and to assert the importance of maintaining their developmental momentum. These notions have entered the discussion as common themes put forward by G77, and in other assemblies of southern nations.

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