

PJW-38

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Preparations for the upcoming United Nations
Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)

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Dear Peter,

Preparations are underway for a major United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), commonly referred to as the "Earth Summit." This meeting will be held 1-12 June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Plans are being prepared to try to get this high-level political meeting to adopt an "Earth Charter" and a proposed political agenda for the 21st Century (called "Agenda 21"). The meeting will mark the 20th anniversary of the United Nations conference on the Environment that was held in Stockholm in 1972.

This will be an official, political UN meeting, with delegations representing member countries. Many national delegations will include heads of state. A series of parallel non-governmental and "independent sector" events, called '92 Global Forum, will be held simultaneously. (According to the Conference terminology, the Independent Sectors encompass the private, commercial sector as well as non-profit development or voluntary organizations.) Numerous issues will be discussed in Rio, such as tropical deforestation, climate change, biological diversity, environmental degradation, and poverty.

Worldwide, environmental and development activists are busy preparing for the conference. These preparations include a wide-ranging number of meetings, conferences, and workshops, lots of writing, publishing and dissemination of information, including electronic conferencing, and research. Some preparatory meetings are being officially organized by the UNCED Secretariat, whereas others are organized by various non-governmental organizations or private groups.

UNCED is organizing four Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings. The first was in Nairobi in August 1990. At that meeting, the official delegates agreed that recognized non-governmental organizations could participate in the PrepCom process. A second PrepCom occurred in Geneva in March 1991 and a third in August 1991. The fourth will be held early in 1992. Besides these general meetings, UNCED has convened working groups to prepare basic documents on particular topics, such as forestry, and has held special topical symposia.

In late May, I attended one such UNCED symposium. The meeting, entitled "Women and Children First," focused on the impact of environmental degradation and poverty on women and children. Filomena Chioma Steady, UNCED's Special Advisor on Women in Environment and Development, convened and chaired the meeting. For this meeting, a number of papers were commissioned. I was asked to write a paper on forestry issues (see PJW-37).

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The meeting was held at the Palace of Nations, the European United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. The eighty-six participants comprised a cross-section of researchers, development activists, politicians, and United Nations organization representatives. Most participants were women.

In introducing the symposium, several speakers noted the need to put women and children first in discussions of environment and development issues. As the World Commission on Environment and Development noted, children are our future, the goal of sustainable development. Too often, however, women and children are the last to be considered in environment and development debates.

At our meeting, Bella Abzug stated that the participation of women in the UNCED process had been very disappointing. She noted that fewer women participated in the Second PrepCom than in the First. Our symposium was convened to bring more attention to women's and children's issues in the overall UNCED debate, and also in specific thematic topics, such as deforestation. Maurice Strong, who heads the UNCED Secretariat, stated that the results of the meeting would receive serious consideration in the UNCED process.

Most UNCED preparations and meetings have overwhelmingly focused on the environment, without much consideration of the interrelated development issues. While sustainable management of the environment is the necessary basis for all development, the environment cannot be sustainably managed without serious consideration of people and their needs for development. Filomena Steady expressed the hope that the Symposium on Women and Children First could correct this trend, by bringing more attention to important development concerns.

Depending upon one's definitions, the "environment" and "development" can both be construed very widely, to encompass the vast diversity of human endeavors and concerns. Several major issues received attention at the symposium, such as definitions of development, population and family planning issues, structural readjustment policies, and the incorporation of women's and children's concerns into the ongoing environment-development debate, and UNCED preparations. Concerns were expressed about indigenous peoples, refugees, and other disadvantaged people, such as the handicapped. Issues ranged across the spectrum, relating to agriculture, forestry, dams, water, industries, urban environments, human rights, the impacts of military spending, and violence in the media. I will highlight a few discussion areas, relating to women, forestry, natural resources, and development, which were of particular interest to me.

Population issues received much attention at this Symposium. Quite often, one hears human population growth cited as the major reason for environmental degradation. Global deforestation, for example, is often attributed to burgeoning population levels. Most participants at this Symposium, however, rejected this simplistic equation.

Human population issues were discussed on several levels: (1) population growth rates and their impacts upon the environment, (2) blaming environmental problems on women's "uncontrolled fertility," (3) concern over fetal rights (to the detriment of women's rights), (4) family planning as a health issue for women and children, (5) declining populations for certain indigenous groups, such as native North Americans, and (6) population-resource consumption patterns.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecologist, noted that in the current environmental and development crisis, women and children are first -- they are the first to go down. Structural readjustment programs disproportionately affect women and children. Triage policies advocate that the earth's surplus population, its weakest members, be dumped -- again, women and children first.

Shiva said that women are being blamed for environmental problems and for threats to fetal health: therefore, efforts are being launched to control and restrict women's freedoms, ostensibly to protect the environment and unborn children. Population issues, she argued, always come up in times of crisis. Nonetheless, Shiva stated, the real culprits causing environmental pollution -- such as Union Carbide corporation -- can evade criminal accountability for their actions. Shiva recounted how many Indian women, who suffered miscarriages, children born with birth defects, and other medical problems from the Bhopal accident, have been demanding justice and traveling long distances to protest for government action. Indian women do not want government control of their fertility: rather they want government control of threats to their fertility, such as irresponsible multi-national corporations.

Other speakers, such as Francesca Farmer, discussed the need to ensure that women have access to family planning services as a basic right and such access is a health issue for women and children. Throughout the developing world, many women lack means to control their reproduction.

Patricia Bellanger and Holly Young Bear Tibbetts, representing the International Indian Treaty Council, discussed the activities of indigenous peoples to engage in policy debates about their resources and environments. In the Pine Ridge Reservation in the United States, Indian women undertook studies of their water systems in 1980, after the Indian women had suffered a 38 percent rate of miscarriages in 1979. The women were able to document contamination: consequently a new water system for the reservation was installed. Many native groups are concerned about declining population levels -- the threat of cultural extinction. In some cases where population levels have been growing, this has been just a recovery from the adverse impacts of colonialization, such as disease and warfare.

The rights of native peoples have been seriously eroded. Although the U.S. government made treaties with Indian nations, the Indian nations are not treated as "nations" -- their disputes with the U.S. government over land and resources are handled in U.S. courts, not in the World Court. On an international level, however, the indigenous peoples have been somewhat more successful in gaining political recognition. Since 1975, Indian peoples have been admitted into the United Nations system as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They were organizing a 13th Indian Treaty Conference, to be held in Arctic Village, Alaska. Also, a World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Environment and Development will take place in Rio de Janeiro in late May 1992, immediately before UNCED. They hope that they will be accorded rights to participate in the UNCED meeting.

Another central issue is that many current models of development are non-sustainable, both ecologically and socially. Such models of development ignore or marginalize indigenous or traditional approaches to resource management. Many are actually examples of "mal-development." The resource consumption patterns

of industrialized societies, such as the United States, cannot and should not serve as a model for the rest of the world. Many participants agreed that resource consumption levels of a given population are far more important than actual population numbers.

Maria Mies, a German sociologist, argued that we have to re-define the "good life" and consume less. Twenty percent of the world's population -- living in industrialized societies -- consumes eighty percent of the world's resources. In industrialized societies, as women do much of the household and personal shopping, they can take the lead in consuming less. Mies also referred to the consumption syndrome among some Western women, who become "shopoholics," or shop as response to social insecurity or depression.

Some other participants, however, felt that women should not be held responsible for over-consumption and environmental pollution problems. As Ruth Lechte, who works on energy issues in Fiji, noted, the Green Consumer movement would not, by itself, solve many major environmental pollution problems. Many participants agreed with Lechte that men seem to be the major actors in causing environmental pollution, and women are often left to clean up the mess.

A major stumbling block, Lechte went on to explain, is that although women are expected to deal with environmental problems, they do not have good access to training and funding in science, technology, and research. Who does the research and for whom? What women need is more -- not less -- energy to lighten their workloads: rural women need "clean" energy systems.

Other participants discussed how women are involved in various research endeavors, to solve their environmental problems. Many speakers stressed the need to draw upon women's traditions and knowledge of environmental management. Rosemary Jommo spoke about a project being undertaken by the Environment Liaison Centre, International, to document African women's indigenous knowledge in natural resource management.

Women providing the unpaid labor to clean up the environment and tackle development problems came up in other contexts. When James Grant, Director of the United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF), spoke about the successful worldwide campaign for childhood immunizations, a participant asked about all the voluntary time and labor that women have given to this effort, as it is generally women who take their children to be vaccinated. Grant responded that UNICEF was trying to minimize the voluntary time expected of women.

Overall, Symposium participants agreed with the UNCED report on environmental degradation and poverty, which argues that the first emphasis has to be placed on people, rather than on resources. We also need to re-think development to encompass what women do, know, and value -- activities that are often left out of measurements of development.

How did forestry issues tie into the overall debates? Many speakers used forestry examples in discussing larger environment-development problems.

First, some participants mentioned how we define the issues, and what words we use. Tibbetts noted that while some foresters refer to trees as "broadleaves"

and "woody plants," native American peoples refer to them as "medicine," "food," and "identity." Margaret Mwangola, the Executive Director of the Kenya Water for Health Organization (KWAHO), pointed out that rural women usually do not talk about abstract concepts such as "environment" and "advocacy." Rather, women ask questions such as "where can we find firewood?" She suggested that we must focus more on these community-level concerns.

Some participants mentioned forest resources as concerns for women. A paper on refugee women noted that firewood is often their most pressing concern. UNICEF reported undertaking many small-scale agroforestry activities, and promoting improved cookstoves, to reduce women's workburdens and to improve the lives of their children.

The goal of forest conservation was also questioned. Rosina Wiltshire, Development Coordinator for the Caribbean Conservation Association, at one point asked, "For whom are we preserving these trees?" Vandana Shiva stated that the US \$8 billion Tropical Forestry Action Plan is destroying women's forestry activities worldwide, by promoting industrial (commercial) forestry to the detriment of traditional and small-scale uses of forest resources.

Wiltshire discussed deforestation problems in the Caribbean island nations, such as Jamaica, where structural readjustment policies have increased the cost of food by 40 percent and removed subsidies for kerosene. As a result, many women who were cooking with kerosene have now returned to burning firewood. Nonetheless, Wiltshire argued, women's impact on deforestation is relatively insignificant. The major problem, Wiltshire explained, is that the government has given large forest areas to multinational corporations for coffee plantations, so that coffee exports can earn foreign exchange and pay the country's debts. Also, some indigenous forests have been replaced with exotic pine plantations: the latter are more likely to blow down in hurricanes. With current deforestation rates, in two decades Jamaica could resemble Haiti's deforested landscape. For small island nations, deforestation can increase erosion and flooding, with devastating impacts on coral reefs, fisheries, tourism, and resilience vis-a-vis hurricanes.

Holly Young Bear Tibbetts presented a paper on how the U.S. government took lands of the Anishinaabeg (Chippewa/Ojibwe) people in northern Minnesota to create the Chippewa National Forest. She recounted how the Anishinaabeg have lost traditional lands and resources over the years. The most recent threat to their resources has come from the U.S. Forest Service using the herbicide 2,4-D (which is often contaminated by dioxin). This herbicide is not only a threat to human health, but also suppresses the growth of plants --such as raspberries, birch, poplar, and aspen -- used by the Anishinaabeg for food, medicine, and materials. Tibbetts claims that although the U.S. Forest Service had stated in 1978 that it would discontinue use of 2,4-D, it has not, in fact, done so. Rather it has used 2,4-D in combination with another herbicide, 2,4,5-T.

Pesticide exposure and human rights also was highlighted by another participant, Dolores Huerta, from the United Farm Workers. She mentioned the pesticide problems for Hispanic migrant farm workers in the United States.

The importance of trees as traditional medicines was mentioned by Koumba Boly, from Burkina Faso. She noted that in the Sahel, these medicines are often the only ones to which women have access. She argued that it makes more sense to protect and manage indigenous species for traditional medicines rather than to spend precious foreign exchange importing modern pharmaceuticals.

Another forestry-related issue is resource consumption patterns. Ruth Lechte said that it is not women consumers who pollute the environment: global climate change is not being caused by women burning firewood. She called on Western women to convince their governments to halt policies detrimental to developing countries -- such as the French government's nuclear bomb tests in the South Pacific. She noted that with climate change, some Pacific island countries will disappear.

Although individual actions sometimes have only a limited impact on resolving global problems, they can nonetheless be important in symbolizing actual commitment. Some Symposium participants noted that the United Nations agencies are often better on rhetoric than on actual action. For example, despite the UN's concern with promoting women's rights, its own record in employing and promoting professional women still leaves much to be desired.

Similarly, it was noted that the United Nations has done much to publicize environmental concerns. The United Nations system itself, however, needs to set a more responsible example in use of natural resources. Symposium participants endorsed a recommendation that UNCED and the United Nations agencies should, for example, adopt the use of recycled paper in all UN activities.

The Symposium participants thus seemed to agree that there is a strong need to save the world's forests and trees -- for our children, for local consumption, and for traditional ways of life. The point is not to save the forests so that they can be cut to earn foreign exchange to meet structural readjustment requirements, nor is it to develop national-level Forestry Action Plans that give priority to commercial forestry interests over women's traditional forest uses. Climate change and biological diversity are important to many women, but first on a local -- rather than global -- level.

Parallel to the UNCED preparations are separate negotiating sessions, to develop international conventions on climate change and biological diversity. These meetings aim to develop global consensus on these issues, so that conventions could be signed at the Rio UNCED meetings. The most recent negotiating sessions for both conventions were held in Nairobi in September 1991. Original plans to develop an international forestry convention, however, have been replaced with the idea of forestry principles.

I have not been closely following these negotiations. From discussions with colleagues, however, it appears that many climate and biodiversity debates construe forestry in a very narrow perspective. Many people from Northern countries working on climate change issues, for example, view tropical forests primarily as "sinks" for carbon dioxide, and argue therefore that such forests must be preserved. The role of tropical forests in development or provision of needed resources for local inhabitants is often overlooked.

The 10th World Forestry Congress, which met in Paris from 17 to 26 September 1991, discussed preparations for UNCED. Maurice Strong spoke at the opening session of the World Forestry Congress. He noted that the policy declaration of the Forestry Congress and comments on the Forestry Principles being developed for UNCED would be important contributions to the UNCED process. Strong did not, however, mention the UNCED symposium held on women and children. In his discussion of forestry issues, he did not mention women or children.

Bernardo Zentili, a forester with the UNCED Secretariat, also held an information session at the World Forestry Congress, to review progress on the forestry document. At the Third PrepCom, the forestry working group considered proposed non-binding Forestry Principles. The forestry principles have been broadened beyond the idea of just trying to halt tropical deforestation to stressing forest conservation world-wide, including concerns, for example, with boreal forests and with temperate forests affected by acid rain.

The forestry principles are an improvement over the background document on deforestation written for the Second PrepCom, in that it more explicitly considers people's participation and refers to women and children. (A proposed statement in the forestry principles referring to women's participation is somewhat controversial: some industrialized country delegations can accept that women may be needed for forestry extension work in developing countries, but dismiss the need for women's participation in forestry more generally.)

At the Second PrepCom, Zentili noted, a request was made for more information on women and forestry. In response to a question, Zentili explained that a basic document on women and children's concerns was introduced to the Third PrepCom, and these issues were being integrated into the technical papers.

Other World Forestry Congress colleagues who attended the Third PrepCom meetings, however, painted a much more pessimistic picture of the proceedings. Some feel that the forestry group is moving further away from, rather than closer to, a global consensus on forest conservation and development priorities. Others noted that it has been difficult to win support for women's concerns.

Given that neither Strong nor Zentili highlighted women's issues in their discussions at the World Forestry Congress, I wonder to what degree women and children's concerns will really be incorporated into the UNCED debates, and how much impact the UNCED Symposium on Women and Children has had. I know that Filomena Steady and supportive colleagues are all working very hard to incorporate women's issues, but they seem to have an uphill struggle.

In the next several months of preparations for the Rio meetings, these issues will be debated in other fora. Unfortunately, the 10th World Forestry Congress, held in Paris in mid-September 1991, did not deal very adequately with issues of people's participation or development, but rather stressed more traditional forestry concerns (see PJW-39). Perhaps the two upcoming meetings in Miami, the Global Assembly, Women and the Environment - Partners in Life, and the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, will find the political means to ensure more attention to women's issues. Some delegations plan to lobby more on these issues at the 4th PrepCom.

Opportunities will also exist at several meetings of non-governmental organizations, such as the Balancing the Future meeting to be held 18-22 November in the Netherlands, and the International NGO Preparatory Conference for UNCED to be held 17-20 December in Paris. In Rio in June 1992, at the parallel Independent Sectors meetings, '92 Global Forum, events concerning women and environment issues are already being organized.

The issues will continue to require more attention even after the UNCED meeting takes place. Already there are plans for another UN meeting on women in 1995, to follow up on the UN Women's Decade (1975-1985).

Changes to how global institutions incorporate environmental and development concerns into their normal operating procedures, or how we can facilitate the greater participation of people in general, and women in particular, in debates over the future of our planet, will not come easily. The number of conferences being organized on these issues underscores the importance of the topic, and holds forth the hope that some progress can be made.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

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For more information on UNCED:

A monthly newsletter on UNCED-related meetings, Independent Sectors Network '92, is available from: Centre for Our Common Future and IFC, Palais Wilson, 52 Rue de Paquis, CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland.

United Nations Conference on Environment & Development (UNCED) Secretariat.

1991a Land resources: deforestation. A non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests. Document A/CONF.151/PC/WG.I/CRP.14/Rev.1. Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Third Session, Geneva, 3 September.

United Nations Conference on Environment & Development (UNCED) Secretariat.

1991b Report of the UNCED/UNICEF/UNFPA Symposium on Poverty and Environmental Degradation, "Women and Children First," Geneva, Switzerland, 27-30 May.

Case studies prepared for the UNCED "Women and Children First" Symposium include:

Jommo, Rosemary. African Women's Indigineous Knowledge in the Management of Natural Resources.

Lechte, Ruth. The Energy Crisis: Looking for Alternatives.

Mies, Maria. Consumption Patterns of the North - the Cause of Environmental Destruction and Poverty in the South.

Shiva, Vandana. Women and Children Last: The Impoverishment of Women, Children, and the Environment.

Tibbetts, Holly Young Bear. Divergent Jurisdictions: the Case of Chemically Managed National Forest on Leech Lake Indian Reservation of Northern Minnesota.

UNICEF. Children, Women, and the Environment.

Wiltshire, Rosina. Problems of Environmental Degradation and Poverty with particular emphasis on Women and Children of Island Nations

Williams, Paula J. Women, children, and forest resources in Africa: case studies and issues.

[A shortened version is Newsletter PJW-37, Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH.]