

Lessons Learned at the World Conference on Human Rights

The World Conference on Environment and Development (WCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, set a signal towards looking at matters of environmental protection in a very broad context, with questions of development included in the discussion. A year later, in Vienna, the World Conference on Human Rights (WCHR) brought in another new aspect of environmental problematic: human rights abuses.

The Conference took place from 14 to 25 June 1993. Parallel to this official Conference, a vast number of international NGOs met, first to prepare a common document of NGO-proposals which was to be submitted to the main Conference and then, all through the nearly two weeks of the Conference, groups and individuals presented their experiences of human rights — or, rather, of human rights abuses — in workshops, on posters and in photographs, and through pamphlets and press-releases. Most of these activities actually took place in the same building as the main Conference, and it was at this NGO-level that the listener could learn most about Human Rights and the Environment.

Links between Human Rights and Environment

The classical case of combined human rights and environmental violations concerns the rights of indigenous peoples and their lands. Unviable concepts of 'development' cause the destruction of their living environment and, consequently, threaten their existence which, from time immemorial, has depended on a harmonious relationship between Man and Nature.

Another link that should be mentioned is in the field of children's rights, children being another vulnerable group suffering from severe exploitation (200 millions working in some form of slavery world-wide). They had representatives at this Conference, and submitted a paper indicating their fears, proposals, and demands. Amongst other aspects, their concern for the state of the environment was a major one — obviously, one should say, as it is their future which is most at stake.

Among others, the following cases were reported and elaborated on:

- Illegal logging in the Okomu Forest Reserve, Nigeria, for a rubber plantation by Michelin;
- Oil exploitation by Shell, Chevron, and others, in eastern Nigeria, with tremendous damage to the environment. The indigenous Ogoni-people are denied all political rights to protest against the local destruction;
- Civil war led by Papua New Guinea and supported by Australia against the people of Bougainville following environmental destruction of much of their island through copper exploitation;
- Hydroelectric power-plants threatening the Cree people in Canada;
- Oil Exploitation and coal mining in Venezuela ruining the social structure and identity of indigenous peoples;
- Destruction of rain-forest in Malaysia depriving the indigenous Penan of their basic means for living;
- Death-threats against protectors of the Brazilian Amazon rain-forest: Atanogildo Matao is the next on the 'death-list'. Interview with the human-rights secretary of the Brazilian Ministry of Justice: the government, not being involved directly, is helpless;
- Tibet's environment exploited along with its people by the Chinese. The environmental damages, massive deforestation, and overgrazing, are said to have an impact on the climate of south-eastern Asia. Nuclear pollution forms a particular threat.

Abuses of Human Rights and Environment Widespread

Thus NGO events parallel to the World Conference on Human Rights revealed a number of cases where a violation of human rights went hand-in-hand with gross environmental destruction. The links between the two seemingly distinct fields of NGO-work became evident, violations in both fields being the result of an attitude of disrespect by economic and political powers towards natural and original, yet weaker, living beings. Moreover, this problem is not limited to any particular part of the globe but is sadly widespread. Therefore, a stronger cooperation between human-rights and environmental NGOs, at national as well as international levels, seems highly desirable. Collective rights, such as the right to a clean and healthy environment, must be emphasized more and more in the future.

Along with the loss of their natural environment, many cultures are threatened with extinction. However, it is precisely these cultures whose knowledge is indispensable today, for the concept of *sustainability* runs in their blood. It is precisely that concept which the so-called 'developed world' needs to find and practice if it seriously wants to avoid self-destruction.

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