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Report from Bergen

The Bergen Conference of the United Nations achieved some important advances in directions that should be endorsed by Christians. Mutual understanding between different interests and willingness to co-operate over environmental issues were increased. Many were convinced that industry can be a partner and not an enemy of the environment and that a long term view must be taken and at an international level.

Key Words: Bergen, Brundtland, Environment, Industrial responsibility, Sustainable development.

The UN conference, 'Action for a Common Future', was held at Bergen, 8–16 May, 1990 as a follow-up to the report of the 'Brundtland' Commission, 'Our common future'.¹

Just Another Conference?

Organized by the Government of Norway in co-operation with the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), this was more than just another intergovernmental conference on the environment. Key features were:

- 'East–West', the bringing together at ministerial level of the 34 member countries of the ECE region, covering Eastern and Western Europe and North America—USSR to USA;
- the scope of the subjects covered: economics, energy, industry, awareness-raising and public participation;
- the participation of five non-governmental groups having equal status with government representatives in the pre-ministerial part of the conference—these groups representing industry, science, trade unions, voluntary environmental groups and youth;
- the holding of separate conferences by each of the non-governmental groups.

The 'Bergen Process'

The full participation of the five non-governmental groups was novel, in recognition of the 'Brundtland' Commission's conclusion that all sectors of society have a responsibility for the environment and sustainable development, not just governments.

¹ 'Our common future', report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (commonly named the 'Brundtland' Commission after its chairman), Oxford University Press, April 1987).

The heart of the process was the preparation of a joint 'agenda for action', collecting ideas from various sources, including workshops on each of the conference themes, and negotiating these into a text that was a consensus.

This was an experiment, the first real test coming in the Preparatory Committee meeting in Geneva in March 1990. All parties were somewhat nervous and lacking in experience at being at the table together. When the five non-governmental groups met together, strange bedfellows though we were, we surprised ourselves and the Preparatory Committee as a whole by finding more to agree on than to disagree. On several occasions we spoke with a single voice, first through myself as an industry representative, and then through an environmentalist.

In the full Preparatory Committee meetings, the youth and environmentalist representatives in particular managed to combine their passion with a sense of responsibility and realism.

Thus, despite the nervous start, the Preparatory Committee meeting managed to finish with a remarkable sense of co-operation and common purpose. The non-governmental involvement was widely considered to have been a major factor behind this.

This in essence was the Bergen process. The challenge was whether it could be repeated at the Conference itself, with very many more people involved, the media around, and the more intense atmosphere generally.

Again, the start was very uncertain, and each side argued its case strongly, particularly the environmentalists and youth. Again, especially for those most closely involved, an understanding and respect emerged for others' positions, despite the differences that remained.

What Did Bergen Achieve?

Apart from the documents produced, there were three main benefits.

First, the personal contacts, understanding, respect and friendships that developed amongst the wide range of people involved. The 'Bergen process' was an exercise of interests coming together and the developing of a common will—somewhat fragile but real.

Secondly, the stimulation to each non-governmental group to get its act together, in terms of its own conferences, agendas and participation at the negotiating table. For industry alone, the bringing together of nearly 200 industry leaders and executives from North America and Europe for the Industry Forum, and the close transatlantic teamwork that developed in representing industry's interests at the UN negotiating table, made Bergen well worthwhile. The Science Conference, 'Sustainable development, science and policy' was similarly regarded as very successful.

Thirdly, the enrichment and impetus given to preparations for the global UN Conference on Environment and Development in Brazil in

1992, with a general desire that the non-governmental groups should play a strong part.

During the ministerial part of the conference, the leaders of the five groups had more time to see each other and we strengthened our desire to continue to work together, with the focus strongly on Brazil in 1992. The challenge will be how to reproduce the Bergen spirit with so very many more people, countries and cultures involved.

For industry, the path to Brazil is via Rotterdam, the Second World Industry Conference on Environmental Management, 'WICEM II', on 10–12 April, 1991. This will provide a focus and catalyst for industry's thinking and action. Progress is encouraging and many world business and environmental leaders will be participating.

The science path to Brazil is via a Global Science Conference being convened by the International Council of Scientific Unions.

The Documents Produced

The main documents² produced, which are far from a lowest common denominator, are:

- the 'Joint Agenda for Action', 11 May, representing a common view of representatives of the 34 governmental and five non-governmental delegations;
- the 'Bergen Ministerial Declaration on Sustainable Development in the ECE Region', 16 May.

In addition, the separate agendas prepared by each of the five non-governmental groups also form a formal part of the conference output, industry's being entitled 'Industry Agenda for Action'. Together with the 'Joint Agenda for Action', they provided an input and impetus to the Ministerial Declaration, which was finalized in the following week.

The Ministerial Declaration was more carefully prepared and contains a higher degree of political commitment than the Joint Agenda, the latter having been finalized under intense negotiating pressure in a remarkably short period of time. It is therefore the document that deserves the greatest attention. The Joint Agenda is, though, rich in ideas that 'in the opinion of participants, warrant study, elaboration or further action'.

The papers presented at the Bergen Industry Forum and the 'Industry Agenda for Action' are available in an ICC publication³ that also includes the 'Joint Agenda for Action', the 'Ministerial Declaration' and the executive summary of the Science Conference.

A fuller summary of the Science Conference was produced by the

² 'Action for a common future' Conference Report, Ministry of Environment, Oslo (1990).

³ 'The greening of enterprise—business leaders speak out on environmental issues', International Chamber of Commerce, Paris, ICC Publication No. 487 (June 1990). Also available from ICC United Kingdom, 14/15 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PS.

Norwegian Research Council of Science and the Humanities, Oslo, with a full Conference Report in book form to follow.

Main Issues

The main issues at the conference included the precautionary principle, targets to limit carbon dioxide emissions, means of providing capital and technological resources to developing countries, more extensive use of economic instruments, reducing the use of hazardous substances that are toxic, persistent and bioaccumulative, and developing rules for free and open access to environmental information.

Underlying these were some deeper issues that the 'Brundtland' Commission had brought to the fore.

The Concept of Sustainable Development

Environmentalists had thought that economic growth and the environment were incompatible and that there were limits to growth. Economists had thought that resources put into protecting the environment were unproductive economically.

The Brundtland Commission brought to the world's attention that the environment and economics are in fact interdependent. Development is needed in order to provide resources to protect the environment, but development must be sustainable—to meet 'the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

"The Commission believes that people can build a future that is more prosperous, more just and more secure. Our report, 'Our common future', is not a prediction of ever increasing environmental decay, poverty, and hardship in an ever more polluted world among ever decreasing resources. We see instead the possibility of a new era of economic growth, one that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the environmental resource base. And we believe such growth to be absolutely essential to relieve the great poverty that is deepening in much of the developing world.

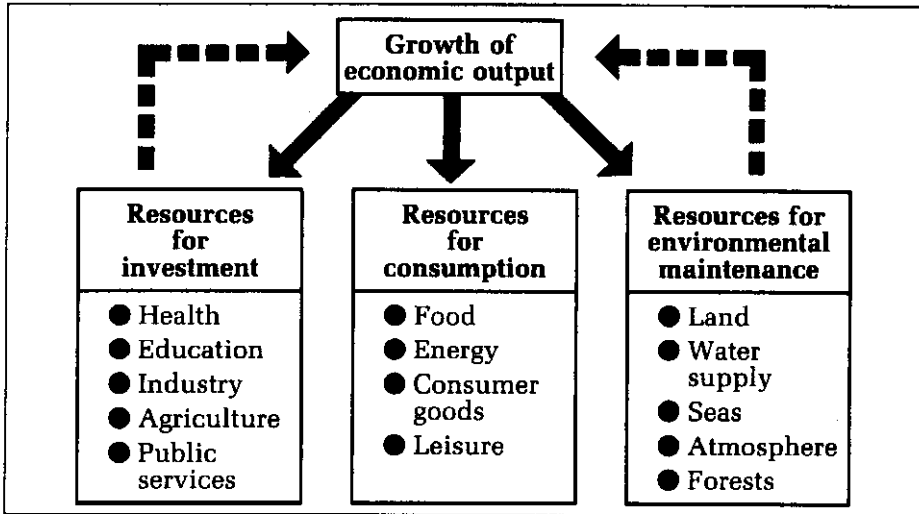
'But the Commission's hope for the future is conditional on decisive political action now to begin managing environmental resources to ensure both sustainable human progress and human survival.'⁴

As one of Europe's leading environmentalists has put it, 'in order to protect, preserve and improve our environment in an increasingly populated world, we must invest. In order to invest, we must earn. In order to earn, industry must succeed.'⁵

4 'Our common future', page 1 (see ref. 1 for full details).

5 Tom Burke, Director of the Green Alliance, 'Is there a common agenda?', RSA Journal, Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers & Commerce, London, (May 1989) page 374.

The environment needs to be regarded as an investment, and the key question is how resources are best allocated—as illustrated in the Figure.⁶ The usual investment criteria apply, namely effectiveness in achieving objectives and efficiency in use of resources.



Finding the right balance in the allocation of resources

The 'sustainable development' themes of utilization and protection are of course brought together in Genesis 2:15, where God puts Adam 'in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it'.

Economics and Ecology

The problem is that economics and ecology have grown apart. Bringing them together will not be easy, however, because economists and ecologists talk different languages. Also, environmental costs are 'external' to or outside the normal cash-flow streams of consumers, governments and enterprises and, therefore, using the environment appears to cost nothing. Hence the strong interest at the conference in economic instruments and market incentives, to see how economics and market forces can be made to work for and not against the environment.⁷

Another underlying issue was the short term focus of society so much of the time, the environment having a much longer time frame. Another virtue of the concept of sustainable development is that it encourages people to think long term.

6 From 'Population, environment and energy', Shell Briefing Service, No. 2, London, (1989).

7 David Pearce, Anil Markandya and Edward B. Barbier, 'Blueprint for a green economy', Earthscan Publications, London, (1989).

Consensus Building

A further issue was the need for a reasonable consensus—between the various sectors of society and between countries—if governments are going to take the difficult decisions that need to be taken.

Bergen did not make any major new decisions. But the novel 'Bergen process' did help to break down barriers and increase partnership between the many people involved, so aiding the process of consensus building.

Industry, for example, is being seen less as the enemy of the environment and more as the essential partner, the provider of the wealth and resources and practical expertise required.

The scientists at Bergen also played an important part, particularly with their conclusion that 'it will be better to find out we have been roughly right in due time than to be precisely right too late'.

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