

Are Things Getting Out of Hand?; Nations must find a way to move faster on the environment.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Mexico was the first country to ratify the recent ozone treaty, and there are encouraging signs from China and a few other developing countries. But there are worrisome signs as well. Representatives of the Indian government have said, in so many words, that since the developed countries caused the problem, they are the ones that should solve it. The echoes of India's position on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty ("we will not consider it until the nuclear nations control their arms") are loud and clear. In that case, India ended up facing a covert nuclear weapons program in Pakistan and the prospect of a South Asian nuclear weapons race. Perhaps this time a clearer view of self-interest will prevail. If not, and if other newly industrializing nations follow India's lead, a highly promising precedent for a new era in multilateral cooperation could turn into a setback.

FULL TEXT

By the end of the 1990s there will be a billion more people in the world than there are today. It took 130 years for the world's population to grow from 1 billion to 2 billion. It will take 12 years to go from today's 5 billion to 6 billion. More than 90 percent of this added billion will live in the developing world, with the result that the developed countries will house only about 20 percent of world population, down by almost half since the end of World War II. Sheer numbers do not translate into power, but a demographic change of such speed and scope cannot fail to affect North-South relations.

Meanwhile, global environmental changes will be gathering force. While we cannot yet regulate acid rain, which may travel hundreds of miles from its source, new and newly discovered forms of air pollution that can travel thousands of miles, or circle the globe, are becoming more important.

If it seems hard to reconcile the interests of Ohio and Vermont, consider the problems in Western and Central Europe, where more than a dozen nations share a thriving exchange, in all directions, of various forms of air pollution. And consider the challenge to international relations of coping with the global changes of stratospheric ozone depletion and greenhouse-induced warming. The latter will make the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade look like child's play.

These impending changes share two salient characteristics: solutions demand the cooperation of all nations, and no country can protect itself from the acts of others. Add to this the high degree of scientific uncertainty (we do not know enough about the planet to predict the outcome of what we are doing to it), and the fact that whatever the consequences are they are likely to be irreversible, and you have a solid basis for joint action. However, the barriers to agreement are also very high. Natural systems are often unfair. Ozone depletion is a good example. Because ultraviolet radiation is strongest near the equator, the effects of depletion may well be worst in the tropics, in countries that have contributed not at all to its causation.

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A boost from the ozone treaty is badly needed. Greenhouse climate change will be much more difficult to solve, and we do not know what other thresholds may be approaching. The oceans remain an almost total mystery, and there is much about the basic functioning of the biosphere, as well as the atmosphere, we do not understand. We do know that world economic activity is growing at an unprecedented rate-having quadrupled since 1950-and must continue to do so, if only to meet basic human needs. Economic growth means more energy use, more emissions and wastes, more land converted from its natural state and more need for the products of natural systems. At some point these systems may become saturated or exhausted, or quietly cross an important chemical or biological threshold. We hardly know where to expect trouble first, or when. We lack early warning systems.

The present modes of international cooperation are unequal to the monumental task ahead. For one thing, they are much too slow for the pace of change we must expect. It typically takes 10 to 15 years to negotiate a global treaty and years more before significant change actually occurs. New ideas and new institutions will be needed-maybe quite soon.

Eventually nations may even have to learn to deal with each other as partners in a joint business venture on whose success they all depend.

The writer is vice president of the World Resources Institute.

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