IUCN Focus Series

Forging a Global Partnership

The role of the corporate sector

IUCN
The World Conservation Union

The following article is an edited version of a speech delivered by Sir Shridath Ramphal to a conference entitled "Asia and the Pacific: Merging Business and the Environment", sponsored by the International Herald Tribune in association with the Thailand Development Research Institute in Bangkok, Thailand on 23 January 1992.

IUCN Focus Series

Forging a Global Partnership
The role of the corporate sector

Sir Shridath Ramphal

President
IUCN – The World Conservation Union

IUCN – The World Conservation Union
1993

Published by:	IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK
Produced by:	IUCN Publications Services Unit, Cambridge, UK, on desktop publishing equipment purchased through a gift from Mrs Julia Ward
Copyright:	(1993) International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
Printed by:	The Burlington Press, Cambridge, UK
Cover photo:	Farmer near chemical combinat, Plock, Poland: WWF/André Maslennikov/IBL
Text photo:	Wind generator, renewable energy source in Koldby, Waddensea, Denmark: WWF/Hartmut Jungius
Focus editor:	Joanna Boddens Hosang IUCN Communications and Corporate Relations Division, Gland
Available from:	IUCN Publications Services Unit 219 Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0DL, UK or IUCN Communications and Corporate Relations Division, Rue Mauverney 28, CH-1196 Gland Switzerland

Printed on recycled paper

Forging a Global Partnership

The role of the corporate sector

Sir Shridath Ramphal, President, IUCN

If one had to say in three words what most endangers the environment they could be: "wealth and poverty" or, perhaps, more pointedly, "industrialisation and under-development". Both are shorthand, of course. One could try a longer explanation: "excessive consumption of resources by one quarter of the world's people who are rich, and intolerable destitution among the other three quarters who are poor". That too is shorthand; each element will need to be elaborated; a major dimension of resources is energy, a major dimension of destitution is population. In the elaboration there will be many specifics: acid rain, greenhouse gases, the ozone layer, global warming, climate change, sea-level rise, species extinction, encroaching deserts, disappearing forests, the fuelwood crisis, nuclear risks, hazardous waste, soil erosion, urban squalor, water depletion—to mention only some of the more prominent.

The question of consumption is central to the environmental crisis. It is human impact on the biosphere that is producing environmental stress and endangering planet earth's capacity to sustain its life forms. That human impact is essentially the energy and raw materials that people worldwide use or waste—and that impact is vastly unequal.

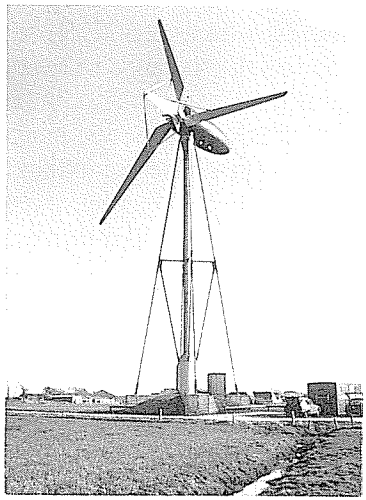
A quarter of the world's population, most living in the industrial countries, account for 75 per cent of human consumption of commercial energy. The other three quarters, living for the most part in the developing world, account for only 25 per cent of commercial energy consumption. On average, each person in a developed country consumes 10 times the commercial energy used by his neighbour in a developing country.[1] That high energy consumption in turn causes vastly more pollution than the low energy

[1] WCED, 1987. *Our Common Future.* OUP, Oxford, UK.

consumption of the poor. Carbon dioxide is a key factor in environmental stress. Each North American person produces ten times as much carbon dioxide as someone living in South Asia or East Asia (excluding Japan).

These pressures of the industrial countries on national and global environmental resources derive not from the numbers of their citizens, but from the scale of their consumption. Their population is virtually stable. Their impact on the biosphere, their pressure on the environment, the degree to which they endanger our planet, can only be lowered by reducing their consumption of energy and other resources. It is clear that with determined effort much can be done, both by those countries that have had initial success (like Japan) and by others among the big consumers who have actually increased their consumption per person. Ironically, the real reductions in per capita consumption of commercial energy since 1970 have been in the poor countries (particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America) as economic growth fell behind population growth.

We have built prosperity on a culture of unwise use of natural resources. Our civilisation will survive or perish dependent on our capacity to make a major adjustment in our relationship with the environment—from one that is rooted in spoliation to one rooted in sustainability. Can the few who have prospered in this way, and whose culture of consumption continues to present the greatest threat to survival of the human species, rise to the challenge while we still have a chance to save ourselves?



Wind generator, renewable energy source in Koldby, Waddensea, Denmark

Developed and developing countries come to the environmental crisis—which is a common crisis—out of such vastly different economic experience and with such vastly different capacities that the crisis itself is in danger of being perceived differently with potentially serious consequences for North/South relations. The industrialised countries of the West enjoyed a period of remarkable, and largely unexpected, economic

prosperity in the 1980s. This prosperity created many undesirable environmental side effects but it also gave them the resources to tackle environmental problems. The more environmentally aware countries have already achieved measurable results in cleaner air and rivers and reduced pollution. This contrasts sharply with the position of large numbers of developing countries, where poverty increased in the 1980s and where, for hundreds of millions of people, life has long been a struggle for bare survival. Where the priority for individuals is managing to survive, and where for governments it is not much different—with high debt service, low commodity prices and protectionist barriers stunting growth—"sustainable development" with due care for environmental security is inevitably seen as a distant goal. Poverty and environment are inextricably linked in a chain of cause and effect. Environmental problems cannot be tackled in isolation from those national and global economic factors that perpetuate large scale poverty.

What makes all this so acutely critical is that every sign points to the incidence of poverty growing in the Third World. For example, excluding China, the number of people in the world on inadequate diets rose from an estimated 650 million to 730 million in the 1970s and is reckoned to have risen much further in the 1980s when economic development was cruelly set back in many countries. Among children under 5, 160 million are reported to suffer protein energy malnutrition—and this includes two-thirds of all children in South Asia.[2] In 21 out of 35 low income developing countries, the daily calorie supply per capita was lower in 1985 than in 1965. In almost a half of 115 developing countries, per capita staple food consumption fell in the 1980s. In most parts of the developing world there have been sharply reduced growth rates, falls in real per capita income, rising unemployment and cut-backs in educational and health provision as a result of austerity measures following an economic crisis.

There is a genuine fear in developing countries that their people's interests are being given scant attention in some of the demands being made by affluent countries. Suggestions that poor countries should forsake opportunities for economic growth, so that problems largely caused by wasteful and reckless consumption in rich countries could be tackled appear to amount to attempts to preserve the present global distribution of wealth and

[2] Figures from UN and World Bank sources.

power. If these North–South differences persist (or grow wider), it will be extremely difficult to achieve harmonious solutions to global environmental problems.

The clamour by some NGOs in industrialised countries for a ban on tropical hardwood is a case in point. Clearly, there is serious over-exploitation of some tropical forests by commercial loggers, and forestry industries have to be made subject to economic disciplines leading to sustainable use. But to concentrate on this issue is to neglect the far more serious problem of forests retreating as growing numbers of poor people seek land for farming or grazing and cut trees for firewood: processes that will continue or even accelerate if the trade in timber ceases. Focusing on logging often involves interfering with and lecturing developing countries; tackling the real problems involves alleviating poverty through accelerated development. Western governments know that such lectures are not the answer; but since, by and large, they have not been ready to help developing countries remove the main causes of forest depletion, they go along with the polemics—and, in doing so, make matters worse.

However, developing countries cannot let the default of the rich encourage them to default as well on some politically forbidding long-term issues critical to their survival; indeed critical to human survival. The counterpoint to consumption among the rich could be population growth among the poor. With the latter, the problem is too little consumption, too few resources available for food, water, health care, sanitation, housing, jobs, energy itself and productive land. Rapid population growth compounds the problems and makes development more difficult. With a fast rising population, countries are driven to incur more foreign debts to meet the basic needs of their people. This in turn increases the demands on their resource base for timber, fisheries, or oil supplies, for example, to generate additional export earnings to service the debt. Yet poor countries with low levels of consumption are the ones with high rates of population growth. For them, the relationship between people and environmental impact is close, but burgeoning populations are straining their natural resource base even though their consumption per person is very low.

Nowhere is there a wider disparity between understandable human choice and inevitable human disaster than in relation to population. For an individual

family on the brink of survival, it makes eminent sense to have several children in the hope that some will survive to support the family. But when many families do the same, the combined result is to produce far more people than the available land and the infrastructure of schools, health and other services can sustain. In Kenya, which suffers acutely from land hunger, urban unemployment and environmental stress, a woman now produces 8 children on average; the population is expected to rise from 25 to over 80 million in the next 35 years—even if the birth rate is halved over that period. In Bangladesh, where almost every acre of cultivable land is already used—and millions live precariously on mudbanks facing imminent disaster—the population is expected to double from 110 million to 220 million over the same period, again assuming a halving of the birth rate. Increases in population pressure of this order contribute to many of the world's most acute environmental problems like desertification and deforestation.

These problems do not arise from ignorance. There is, in most poor countries, a sophisticated awareness of the kind of agricultural practices that are sustainable. Particularly in India, China and Indonesia and also in many parts of Africa, there are, in peasant farming communities, traditions of terracing, crop rotation, manuring and animal husbandry that long pre-date the arrival of European technology. But poor countries often find themselves trapped in a downward spiral in which the pressures of poverty and rising population lead to sound practices being abandoned in favour of what would increase immediate income. Major responsibilities devolve on the rich countries both in terms of resource transfers to assist development and of creating a world economic environment that is more supportive to the efforts of developing countries to help themselves. That is the essence of the partnership for survival that human society requires.

Economy and ecology are inseparable. Unless the developed world is willing to do much more to alleviate the burden of poverty, many developing countries will not move beyond their current hand-to-mouth existence, let alone advance to the point where they can give due weight to long-term "sustainable development". For Western industrial countries, this is a crucial time that they could easily waste. If they spurn the cries for help from the developing world or they treat the issues of environment and development in a parochial, self-serving manner, they could reap a bitter harvest.

We have to ensure that the Earth's political leadership, supported by the global community, seizes the opportunity to move action for survival up to a higher plane of performance. That community of people is, on the whole, better informed than governments; it is global in its reach and interdisciplinary in its links. It understands intuitively that human fate is inseparable and that belonging to the planet makes us all kin. Equally important is the passion for protecting life on Earth that stirs these non-formal representatives of the world's people. Too easily disparaged as frenetic, that passion for life—"rage against the dying of the light" was how Dylan Thomas once described it—is a necessary antidote against the inertia not only of bureaucracies, but also of formal politics which eschews populism but lives by its instincts. The world will need to heed these insistent voices within countries and in our country the planet.

The world's business community, the corporate sector, multinational corporations and individual national entrepreneurs must be among those insistent voices. In large measure, while industrial processes have been in the forefront of pollution and while business in a wider sense is a driving force in over-consumption, it is also the case in my experience that the business community—and particularly multinational corporations working in a global environment, financial, operational and intellectual—are sensitive to our environmental danger.

Business knows, more than most, how necessary it is to forge that partnership for survival. The corporate sector must be a major player in bringing it about through all the influence it commands. Business has an important duty, therefore, to ensure that environmental actors after the Earth Summit do not miss the chance to follow through in setting that partnership in place. In an ironic reversal of roles, it is on business that we may have to rely to take the longer view, while governments retreat from vision to a preoccupation with votes in the short term.

Survival concerns us all. We are all involved; we must all contribute. Merging business and the environment is a global mandate.

Editor's note

Sir Shridath Ramphal is also the author of *Our Country, The Planet: Forging a Partnership for Survival,* written at the invitation of the Secretary-General to UNCED for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, June, 1992.

Other Titles in the Series

Holdgate, Dr M.W. (1993). *Can Wildlife Pay for Itself?* IUCN, Gland and Cambridge.

Sir Shridath S. Ramphal
President
IUCN – The World Conservation Union

Sir Shridath Surendranath (Sonny) Ramphal, elected as President of IUCN – The World Conservation Union at its 18th General Assembly in 1990, has been active in international affairs throughout his career and been prominent in advancing the interests of the developing world.

A citizen of Guyana, Sir Shridath read law at King's College in London and later at the Harvard Law School on a Guggenheim Fellowship. As Guyana's Attorney-General, he drafted the country's independence constitution. He later served as Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Justice. He was Vice-President of the UN General Assembly in 1968 and 1973.

Elected Secretary General of the Commonwealth in 1975, he served three five-year terms. He chaired the West Indian Commission, which issued its report in 1992, and is now Co-Chairman, with Ingvar Carlsson, former Prime Minister of Sweden, of the Commission on Global Governance.

Sir Shridath served on each of the five independent international commissions which considered global issues in the 1980s: the (Brandt) Commission on Development Issues, the (Palme) Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, the (Brundtland) Commission on Environment and Development, the Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, and the South Commission. He chaired the UN Committee on Development Planning from 1984 to 1987.

He was a Special Advisor to the Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, and his book *Our Country, The Planet: Forging a Partnership for Survival* was written for the conference.

Sir Shridath is the Executive President of the Willy Brandt International Foundation and Chancellor of the Universities of the West Indies, Warwick and Guyana.

The recipient of honours from several countries, Sir Shridath has also been awarded many honorary degrees.

IUCN – The World Conservation Union

Founded in 1948, IUCN – The World Conservation Union brings together States, government agencies and a diverse range of non-governmental organisations in a unique world partnership: some 773 members in all, spread across 123 countries. The Union seeks to work with its members to achieve development that is sustainable and that provides a lasting improvement in the quality of life for people all over the world.

The IUCN Focus Series

The IUCN Focus Series aims to provide a range of thought-provoking essays on topical conservation and sustainable development issues. Content may be drawn from a variety of sources, generally within IUCN, often relating to subjects where policy is under development, reappraisal or refinement. The series is not intended to be an official statement of IUCN policy but to provide insights and material for further debate and discussion.

See final page for further titles in this series.

IUCN – The World Conservation Union
Rue Mauverney 28,
CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland
Tel: ++ 41 22 999 0001; Fax: ++ 41 22 999 0002
Telex: 419 624 iucn ch