

action is taken at an early enough stage changes may take place that are beyond the power of humans to correct. The depletion of stratospheric ozone due largely to man-made compounds is an obvious example, loss of species and biological diversity another.

But so are other issues much closer at hand, like the loss of arable soil which, in 1972, appeared to be a problem "fixable" by intelligent choices of land-use and technology. These were soon recognized to be economically or socially beyond the reach of many countries; initially due to population growth or increased costs of petroleum, currently abetted by indebtedness and the inability of governments and their institutions to overcome structural difficulties. The continuing degradation of the resource base in Africa suggests an apparent irreversibility in the face of economic hardship.

Even for those countries with less severe economic constraints, the risk of irreversibility is compounded by the combined effects of uncertainty and long lead-times. There is a growing likelihood that effective preventive action to reduce risks cannot be taken until uncertainty is reduced by compelling evidence; yet in some situations - the effects on low islands of sea-level rise due to climate warming, and the loss of biological diversity are perhaps the best examples - by the time "compelling evidence" is at hand, it may be too late to take the actions that can reduce the risk to acceptable limits.

Links Between Global and Local scales. Examining these issues in relation to food security, WCED concluded that progress on UNEP's 1977 "Plan of Action to Control Desertification" was hampered by "lack of financial support from the international community, by inadequacies of the regional organizations established to respond to the regional nature of the problem, and by the lack of involvement of grass-roots communities."

UNCED presents an opportunity to provide a new impetus for cooperative action to link preventive local measures with their global consequences and to mobilize international support for grass-roots participation in preventive action to stem what may otherwise become irreversible trends.

Flexibility. The combined effects of uncertainty and growing lead-times argue for considerable flexibility when agreements are reached on measures to reduce risk or prevent damaging trends from continuing to their