

Executive Summary

The opening sections of this Review present a survey of the major developments leading up to, during and, after the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. It observes that the idea of a conference covering as many complex national and international issues under the catch-all word "environment" was met with considerable scepticism and some active opposition. In spite of the cool climate and the inevitable difficulties of designing a world conference in such a new field, the Secretary General and a small number of committed governments, including the Canadian, were able to produce a credible agenda and work program, and to mobilize support sufficient to carry it through with remarkable success. It is still regarded as one of, if not the most important in U.N. history.

2. In addition to approving the Declaration on the Human Environment and 109 recommendations for international action which are summarized in the Review, the Conference forced governments and the private sector to focus their attention on the real and serious risks that nations were confronting because of the heavy demands that were being made on the earth's resources by the accelerating increase in world economic growth.

3. Third World countries were doubtful, initially, about the impact of these risks, and they distrusted the motives and questioned the measures proposed mainly by the Western countries (and the Western oriented Secretariat). They suspected it was part of a plan which, advertently or inadvertently, would inhibit their economy and social growth. In the subsequent two decades developing countries, while continuing to place heavy responsibility on the industrialized world for environmental damage and the wasteful use of resources, came to realize that they and the world are indeed facing serious and perhaps irreversible environmental degradation.

4. In addition to the concrete decisions taken at the Stockholm Conference and the subsequent implementation of some of them, the Conference served to put "the environment" on the agenda of nations in the 1970's and 1980's. In these decades existing environmental damage became more serious, visible, and costly, and new threats were added to the agenda. In order to re-focus the world's attention and to re-vitalize support for existing and new environment programs, the UNGA established the World Commission on Environment and Development - the Brundtland Commission. It produced the most comprehensive and imaginative report that we have yet had, covering the state of the world's environment and proposing in constructive programs how governments and their peoples must achieve economic growth based on "sustainable development" if humanity is to survive. These challenges are before governments and their peoples: UNCED will provide the opportunities to decide whether, when and how they intend to proceed.