Chapter VIII

Conclusions

The study about the role of developing countries in the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has led to interesting insights into the operation of North-South politics in environmental matters within the first United Nations (UN) agency established in a developing country. It has also highlighted the unequal pattern of consumption and imbalances in the world. Developing countries within UNEP have attempted to correct this unjust and inequitable division of resources and responsibilities, a struggle which is eternal given the obstinate approach of the North to work for a just world order – a necessary precondition for cleaner and better environment.

At the time when UNEP was taking shape, developing countries regarded environment as least of their concerns. For them issues such as poverty, development, shelter, sanitation, potable water, etc. were more fundamental problems of the day and in this situation, environment was important only so far as it was an appendix to the overall process of development. The Stockholm Conference proved to be a much needed jolt to shake them out of their slumber and take concerted action, both to safeguard their respective environments and develop concerted bargaining positions in international environmental negotiations. The developing countries’ coalition was successful in gaining a lot of concessions from developed countries at the Stockholm Conference. Developed countries were willing to bend a little more than usual because they wanted the co-operation of the developing countries to safeguard the environment. As a result, the international environmental debate moved from mere pollution, pesticides, protection of species, etc. to include larger and more fundamental issues of poverty, need and human settlements. Developing countries were successful in intertwining the concepts of environment and development and linking the protection of environment to international equity, just economic order and fair distribution of resources.
Throughout the entire period of environmental debate within the UN, developing countries asserted the principle of national sovereignty over natural resources which was an extension of their apprehensions about new form of environmental conditionalities or attempts to subjugate their free will or action. Sovereignty over natural resources was underlined as a non-negotiable instrument and it often became a means to secure concessions from developed countries, especially in matters where developing countries had an upper hand as far as natural resources reservoirs (e.g., biodiversity) were concerned. The argument that went on in the developing countries’ circles was that since the North is responsible for much plunder of the natural resources, it must bear the costs of its rejuvenation and protection. Moreover, if the co-operation of the developing countries was required, transfer of adequate technology and aid must precede it.

UNEP established in 1972 as per the recommendations of the Stockholm Conference added another actor to the international environmental arena. Developing countries, through joint and concerted action, were successful in locating it in Nairobi, Kenya. They were also instrumental in enlarging the size of the Governing Council (GC), Secretariat and establishing the Environment Fund. They sought to use environment as a leverage to wrest financial aid from the North.

The political climate of the sixties and seventies favoured developing countries. It was the period of ascent of the Group of Seventy-seven (G-77) and of Non-Alignment, which was its political arm. The establishment of United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), resolutions on New International Economic Order (NIEO), formation of the oil cartels and offices of UNEP and Habitat at Nairobi were the notable achievements of that period. As far as the structure of UNEP was concerned thus, developing countries had managed to assert their might. Moreover, developing countries pursued their broader agenda of NIEO within the GC of UNEP. They linked environmental protection with the wider issues of equitable and just economic order. The majority enjoyed by them in the GC enabled them to take a number of decisions that particularly favoured developing countries or addressed their environmental concerns. The G-77 was particularly active in the so-called ‘political’ matters such as apartheid, Palestine,
etc. Here again, UNEP was used as a forum to pursue a larger political and socio-economic agenda, which often had close links with environmental matters.

However, despite the majority presence of developing countries within the GC, the Programme could not always translate these decisions into actual policy actions. This is due to the lack of activism of the G-77 on environmental issues in particular, and also due to the control over financial contributions by developed countries who in turn dictated the agenda and allocation of funds. As a result, UNEP gradually shifted its focus to areas that were primarily high on the environmental agenda of developed countries such as Earthwatch network, climate, ozone, etc. and the substantial allocation of the funds went to these areas. Moreover, in recent years GEF has emerged as an important medium to give aid to developing countries in the selected area of climate, ozone, biodiversity, etc. and has thus, become an instrument to further the goals of the North. So while the GC had taken numerous decisions favouring developing countries nothing much was achieved in practice. Developed countries had the key to financial donations and used it to pull the strings of UNEP’s activities.

The shift in UNEP’s focus is also due to the fact that activities of the G-77 at Nairobi were very restrained. The Nairobi chapter of G-77 was opened as late as 1983. It was very active in sponsoring so called ‘political’ resolutions but on environmental issues one finds only sporadic instances of the activities of G-77. In the absence of a pro-active role by the G-77, developing countries within UNEP instead of prescribing the international environmental agenda were swayed by the dictates of developed countries. In other words, instead of being pro-active, they became passive reactors to the emerging environmental agenda of UNEP as laid down by developed countries.

Also, differences within developing bloc often led to a fractured approach to environmental issues and together with the inflexible approach of developed countries wrecked the interests of developing countries. This is reflected in the debates and the voting pattern of developing countries at the floors of the GC. For instance, Brazil, Iran, etc. opposed population control as a tool to better environment whereas India advocated a balanced approach. Similarly, Bangladesh
and Mauritius supported Climate Change Convention but Saudi Arabia and Kuwait did not. Also, Argentina, Iran, India and Brazil sided with developed countries in opposing free access to genetic resources while other developing countries which have a less developed biotechnology industry, supported it.

As far as voting pattern of developing countries, as a bloc is concerned the results are not uniform. One does observe a clear degree of unity of action but it does not follow that they voted as a bloc within the GC of UNEP. The clear majority that they enjoyed at the GC clearly gave them ample opportunity to pursue their points of view and approach, but the study reveals that developing countries formed an unstable coalition which is reflected in their fragmented voting pattern. Nevertheless, there appears to be a clear trend towards forging a united and concerted action by developing countries. It can thus be said that although developing countries emerged as coalition partners within the UNEP, the difference of opinion and sometimes differing environmental priorities amongst them often resulted in a fractured approach to environmental issues. Moreover, since developing countries differ vastly in size, geography, culture and most importantly, economic development, the study has found instances of coalition with the developed countries by some developing countries depending upon their respective national interest.

Amongst developed countries, USA held the forte to safeguard the interests of developed countries on every occasion. Most of the times, it single-handedly opposed any move to give concessions to developing countries. Without any regard to ethical and moral considerations/ obligations, USA pursued its national interest to the hilt within UNEP. Other developed countries repeatedly underlined the limits of UNEP mandate and opposed any attempt of developing countries to include broader issues related to the environment. The Nordic countries often appeared sympathetic to developing countries’ demands but by and large voted with the developed bloc or abstained. Former East Germany supported UNEP’s work in the field of environment and development which it regarded as inseparable from the struggle to restructure international economic relations, to overcome economic backwardness and end the exploitation of natural resources of developing countries by
multinational corporations. Former USSR too supported developing countries in most cases and in China they found another ally.

The lack of developing countries' activism at UNEP can be attributed to the structure and nature of the Programme. UNEP by its very nature had problems in implementing the developing countries' environmental agenda. Since it was not an executive agency, it could not act but only catalyse and co-ordinate. The ad-hoc and unpredictable mode of funding of UNEP made the Programme a lame duck. The continuous demarcation of its jurisdiction and talks about reorganising UNEP did not help matters and it failed to live up to the expectation of developing countries as well as developed countries while attempting to do the former. This became an unending circle whereby UNEP was marginalised because the developed countries refused to pay up and because there were no funds, it gradually lost its leeway of action.

The task of balancing the interests of the North and the South added to the burden of a cash-strapped UNEP as their respective environmental needs and priorities did not coincide. In other words, UNEP could not isolate itself from the North-South politics, the operation of which resulted in weakening the Programme. Gradually, thus a trend set in which was manifested in the creation of new institutions, etc. on environment which lay outside the framework of UNEP. The inability of UNEP to successfully tackle the demands of developing countries which was partly inherent in the structure and mandate of the Programme, forced them to take recourse to General Assembly's action on creating additional institutions. As a result Habitat was created to handle human settlement – a thrust area of the developing countries. Moreover, the lack of confidence of developing countries in UNEP to successfully give them a better bargaining stance and tackle environment in a broader socio-economic context forced them to establish an independent commission on a new environmental strategy for the future, i.e. Brundtland Commission. Similarly, the negotiating panels on Convention on Climate Change, Convention on Desertification and the convening of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) were executed under the auspices of the General Assembly. Hence, both the developed and developing countries were instrumental in weakening and undermining of UNEP. Developed countries by with-
holding or giving meagre sums and the developing countries by creating other avenues to realise their demands.

The convening of UNCED and the negotiations on the Biodiversity Convention once again brought the core issues of aid, transfer of technology, equity, etc. at the centre stage of international debate on environment. By the time the Biodiversity Convention was negotiated, developing countries had become quite assertive in their demands. As a result, they were able to establish a clear linkage between access to genetic resources and adequate compensation, transfer of aid and technology and recognition of the principle of sovereignty over natural resources over the common heritage principle. Their demands were met halfway by developed countries as no new funding mechanism was created to assist developing countries in protecting their biological diversity and transfer of biotechnology was made subject to the patent regime.

At UNCED again (like at the GC), the majority enjoyed by developing countries enabled them to pursue their twin goals of environment and development but results as a whole, were disappointing on the side of practical implementation of their demands or proposals. After nearly two decades of their demands for a suitable aid and technology package on environmental protection measures, developing countries remained from where they started in 1972. At this juncture (1992) too the environmental agenda of developing countries was very much the same as that at the time of the Stockholm Conference. It thus shows that their demands of a new international economic order – a central plank of the developing countries’ environmental agenda – were met with little success. Despite demands to the contrary, nothing concrete was achieved on the realisation of just and equitable world order. However, it can also be asserted that it was primarily due to the efforts of developing countries that the international community recognised the importance of development and poverty alleviation to the overall concern for environmental protection. Developing countries were able to broaden the environmental agenda of the UN system as a whole both outside and within the UNEP.

The post-UNCED phase in the history of UNEP unleashed a massive restructuring of the Programme. UNCED created a Commission on Sustainable
Development based in New York and numerous other agencies on environment. The move further cornered UNEP in the environmental activities of the UN system, given the already narrow mandate and jurisdiction that it was assigned. At the same time, there is a proposal to create a new super-eco agency which is primarily spearheaded by developed countries. A notable characteristic of this proposal to create a new body is that it would be based in a developed country – New York, Geneva or Bonn. By 1992, things had changed on political front as well. The collapse of the communist world rendered developing countries directionless as the ideology of Non-Alignment became a limited tool of action. There seems to be no apparent rebuttal by developing countries to the Western nations’ proposals to shift some of the environmental functions to other agencies or to the proposals for creation of a new environment agency. Perhaps, developing countries’ disenchantment with UNEP is a factor behind such inaction on their part. The fact that an important developing country, Brazil is also behind a move to create a new environmental agency along with Germany, Singapore and South Africa clearly speaks of a new kind of realignment. This indicates coalition with the developed countries’ bloc at the cost of or in gross breach of the unity of developing countries and also highlights disarray in the developing bloc in the new international order.

Similar realignment is also noticeable in the fact that it was India and the UK who drafted the alternate proposal to revitalise and restructure UNEP after consultations with G-77 and other groups at the in special session of the GC in 1997. The proposals were adopted by consensus and reflect an attempt to balance the interests of developed and developing nations and also give due importance to developing countries needs.

Despite the massive reorganisation of UNEP in the post UNCED era, UNEP’s future remains shrouded in uncertainty. However, since it is housed in a developing country, any move to wind up UNEP would be seen as detrimental to the interests of developing countries. Perhaps due to this very reason UNEP despite all its weaknesses will continue to survive. In future perhaps developing countries’ confidence in the UNEP which is based in one of their brethren nations, will be restored too.