

Forum: Environment Committee

Issue: Environmental exploitation in the name of economic growth

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Introduction

Exploitation of the environment has become a concept so comfortably nested within human nature that efforts to change this mindset have been largely diminutive and futile. The overriding economic interests for an entity to use common resources for the benefit of self is simply too tempting to resist for many. Yet the equal stake each individual has in the future of our environment is often overlooked mainly because it is much easier to live solely in accordance with the present.

The above describes the conundrum that all environmental scientists find difficult to resolve. Many countries and corporations exploit non-renewable, shared resources with impunity and a blatant disregard for future implications that present actions will bring. The landmark report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, entitled "Our Common Future", warned that unless we change many of our lifestyle patterns, the world will face unacceptable levels of environmental damage and human suffering.

While the obvious point may be that the world is overexploiting its natural resources for selfish economic growth and that these wrongs will have to be put right, this situation can be considered in an opposite light. We may wish to consider the fact that exploitation of our natural resources, to a sustainable degree, is the only way society will attain economic and technological progress. Hence, the exploitation of natural resources has to take place to a sustainable degree in the long-run.

Delegates are encouraged to consider the issue with the above two perspectives as delineated. Delegates should not only provide remedies for the current overexploitation of natural resources that we face, delegates should also consider setting the ground rules for a sustainable programme through which we can ensure that environmental exploitation will become a positive process to society. By implementing existing rules that governments should work within or through the creation of new frameworks that act as a guide for each government's actions, the international community will progress towards a future of controlled environmental exploitation. When restricted within a sustainable boundary, environmental exploitation combined with environmentalism can not only reconstruct economic value such that environmental protection is rewarded in the market, but also accentuate the growth of new kinds of economic activity.

Definition of Key Terms

Environmental exploitation

Environmental exploitation is defined as the harvesting of renewable resources to meet the needs of individuals or the society. This term alone is not deprecatory of the practice, meaning it is not something detrimental. Environmental exploitation has a broad scope that encompasses activities as innocuous as fishing, to environmentally-harmful practices such as logging on a massive scale.

However, for the sake of this discussion, we will assume that the level of environmental exploitation that we are looking at is above that of environmentally-friendly and when continued over a long period of time, will have serious environmental repercussions.

Overexploitation

Overexploitation is defined as harvesting a renewable resource to a point of diminishing returns such that sustained practice can result in the expedited depletion of the resource. This term is a disapproving version of the environmental exploitation as described above due to its excessive nature. For the purposes of this discussion, overexploitation and environmental exploitation will be used interchangeably.

Environmentalism

Environmentalism is a broad philosophy and social movement regarding concerns for environmental conservation and improvement of the state of the environment. In simpler terms, it is a movement for individuals who are pro-environment to fight for more environmentally-friendly policies.

Environmental sustainability

Sustainable development as an overarching concept comprises 3 tenets: economic, environmental and social sustainability. Hence, environmental sustainability seeks to sustain global life-support systems indefinitely. Most of our world's resources can be depleted, such as oil, wildlife, timber, and metals. Environmental sustainability is the concept that advocates the maintenance of these large resources for as long a period of time as possible. Delegates should be aware that the key to resolve environmental exploitation is by larger scale adoption of environmentally sustainable techniques of harvesting natural resources. Hence, we should pay equal, if not more attention to the concept of sustainability.

General Overview of the topic

In this section, a brief history and a list of key issues will be delineated. Delegates should note the progression of history and its relation to the key issues that pop up during such progressions. This will come in helpful when generating ideas for resolutions or during discussions in committee time.

Brief history of topic & efforts to combat environmental degradation

Delegates should note in particular the layout of this section. This section discusses the developments of environmental awareness in tandem with some examples of environmental exploitation over the past few centuries. Understanding this dichotomy is important as the committee will not look at environmental exploitation in isolation, but also the mechanisms that prevent this phenomenon. Delegates should also note that the examples of environmental exploitation raised here are salient cases to be considered for an understanding of this topic, but are not fully illustrative of the broad and overarching topic. Delegates should conduct further research into more instances of such overexploitation to strengthen their perspective and knowledge of the issue.

Environmental degradation due to overexploitation has been a problem that found its origins since the 16th century, when there was an accelerated pace of resource harvesting to meet increased human needs. For example, timbering in the forests of England, France, and Germany left large tracts of land totally denuded by around 1550 in England and the 1600s in the rest of continental Europe, forcing a switch to coal. However, the environmental degradation during this period of time was still minimal and did not pose a concern for societies then.

During the period of the Enlightenment, when logic succeeded superstition and other traditional beliefs as the primary factor of reasoning, Thomas Malthus predicted that food and other natural resources would eventually run out as populations around the world grew. His works symbolized the beginnings of environmental awareness and the need for sustainable use of our world's limited resources. Yet it was not until the 20th century before there was a widespread understanding and realization of the accelerated pace at which we deplete our natural resources.

The developments of the Industrial Revolution that followed increased our demand for natural resources as logging and fishing, two examples of activities that were commercial but limited, now became industries of their own. In the case of over-fishing, the development of bigger boats made it possible to fish in deeper seas and the technique of having pairs of boats dragging massive nets between them proliferated in the 19th century, endangering the populations of aquatic creatures at large. Examination of records including log books of whalers indicated that populations of the southern right whale off New Zealand totaled 22,000 to 32,000 in the early 19th century. They now total perhaps 1,000 after over-hunting.

In the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, there began to sprout many attempts in championing environmental protection and fighting against overexploitation, mostly in Western countries. A prime example would be the General Federation of Women's Clubs founded in the USA in 1890, which placed conservation and ecology among their top priorities. In the subsequent decades, over a million women participated directly in reform efforts during the Progressive era, and the government developed national committees on forestry, waterways and rivers and harbors to prevent

overexploitation of these resources. Environmentalist groups like these were the impetus that created a wider realization of the costs behind environmental negligence after World War 2.

Halfway through the 20th century, efforts were increasingly stepped up by pro-environment groups all around the world as governments are became more empathetic to environmental concerns. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, and for the first time, the representatives of multiple governments were united at an international conference to discuss the state of the global environment. This conference directly led to the creation of the United Nations Environmental Program as well as many governmental environment agencies.

Another significant milestone for the progress of environmental awareness was the creation of the Brundtland Commission in 1983. The fruit of the Commission's labour was a report published in 1987, known as the Brundtland Report. This authoritative report is one of the first attempts to expound on the new concept of 'sustainable development', its importance in today's rapidly industrializing world and highlight the political changes that are necessary to achieve this ideal. The report laid the rudimentary groundwork that led to the adoption of many subsequent efforts to combat environmental exploitation, such as the Earth Summit in 1992, the adoption of Agenda 21 also in 1992 and the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development. More recent efforts to tackle environmental exploitation include the Copenhagen Summit of December 2009.

As efforts are being stepped up by environmentalist groups to tackle the plague that is environmental exploitation, they are consistently being offset by egregious instances of overexploitation by states and corporations, often across international boundaries. China's exponential expansion into Africa provides a prominent example for this discussion. China's environmental footprint in Africa has long been a topic of much contention and disapproval. This worry is compounded by a lack of a powerful environmental lobby in China to criticize Beijing's wanton exploitation of Africa's natural resources. In an attempt to sidestep the environmental regulations placed on the country and continue maintaining economic growth, China has embarked on the strategy of 'exporting' its environmentally-exploitative activities to other continents, Africa in particular.

In Gabon, the exploitative nature of a Chinese state-run oil company, Sinopec, has prompted much controversy. In 2002, Gabon selected a quarter of the country as a nature reserve, protecting 67,000 square kilometers of mostly virgin rainforest. However, Sinopec has continued to prospect for oil in these nature reserves, dynamiting large areas of the reserve and paving roads through the forest. Sinopec's activities have led to large-scale pollution of the air and water bodies about the reserve.

Possibility of maintaining both environmental protection & economic growth

Environmental policies have often been resisted on the grounds that they will cost jobs, and slow economic growth. The advent of globalization heightens such fears within many governments as it is much easier for corporations to relocate their operations to another country where environmental

regulations are lax, damaging the local economy in the process. From a macro perspective, the costs of implementing environmental regulation to a country are large. By an estimate in 1990, the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol can cost as much as USD 100 billion in annual output for Western nations and USD 50 billion for Japan alone. In other nations, the Kyoto Protocol can cost typical nations an estimated 1 percent of total GDP. The costs alone may be enough to deter governments from adopting stricter regulations to prevent environmental exploitation in their countries.

However, there have been many empirical studies that reflect a positive correlation between economic growth and environmentally-friendly policies. New literature suggests that environmentalism in governments can prompt a variety of new investments and increased organizational efficiency. Environmental policies that demand firms to invest in pollution abatement technologies will create a greater demand for these new products. In the long-run, this will drive research and development in the clean technologies sector, resulting in the production of more efficient products at a lower price. Furthermore, environmental regulations force firms to change their production processes, which help in eliminating inefficient processes that contribute to pollution. In many occasions, pollutions can be reduced by simply replacing old and inefficient operations by firms. Additionally, environmental regulations create incentives for firms to seek cleaner ways to conduct their operations, which usually results in a rise in efficiency and reduction in production costs. Delegates should note that even though the environmental policies under discussion here do not limit the state or firm's exploitation of resources, they serve to reduce the detriments of such environmentally exploitative practices. For example, having factories install filters to prevent pollutants from being released into the atmosphere will lessen the damage done to the environment, thereby reducing the impact on the environment.

Hence, there arises a possibility of maintaining both environmental protection and economic growth in a concurrent manner. Delegates should keep this possibility in mind when crafting ideas for a resolution.

Failure of existing measures to reduce environmental exploitation

There are many price-based mechanisms put in place, such as carbon emissions trading and pollution permits, that fail to address the need to reduce environmental exploitation. The emissions trading scheme, as set out in Article 17 of the Kyoto Protocol, allows countries that have emission units to spare - emissions permitted them but not "used" - to sell this excess capacity to countries that are over their targets.

Environmentalists who regard this policy as a panacea for their carbon pollution problems will have to think again. The system of emissions trading has only served to commodify carbon emissions, allowing their trade across international markets. This simply results in a transfer of carbon pollution from one country to another, but such a system does not reduce the existing level of pollution. The most obvious example of this flaw would be the emission trading situation with Russia. After the economic collapse and subsequent breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1989, Russia inherited the carbon pollution

standards of the Soviet Union under the Kyoto Protocol. Russia's economic decline has meant that its carbon dioxide emissions have decreased by some 30% below 1990 levels and its pollution levels in the 1990s are a mere fraction of the Soviet Union's levels before 1989. This enabled Russia to sell its rights to Eastern European countries, USA and Japan, even though no actual reduction in pollution levels has taken place.

Also, emission trading tends to protect heavy polluting firms or industries by allowing them to purchase carbon credits; this in no way incentivizes them to seek cleaner and more efficient processes that will reduce environmental exploitation. Hence, not only does emission trading fail to reduce existing levels of production or encourage firms to cut down on environmentally exploitative activities, it provides an easy way out for firms to purchase carbon credits and continue its polluting operations, thus perpetuating environmental exploitation. Hence, delegates should consider solutions to deal with the problems that price-based systems bring about. This section does not discourage the use of price-based mechanisms, but provides food for thought for delegates to consider improvements to price-based mechanisms such that it will help reduce environmental exploitation.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States of America

The official policy of USA seeks to protect the environment for future generations while minimizing the government's interference in the market. The USA has adopted many national policy tools in pursuance of such a goal as stated above.

Yet in realistic terms, the 300 million-strong American population has the highest environmental footprint in the world. The United States emits almost one quarter of total carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases in the world- emissions that are expected to soar by 43 percent by 2020. Americans also use an average of three times more water than the average planet resident. Furthermore, widespread pollution has left roughly 40 percent of rivers off-limits to fishing and bathing.

The United States has been largely amenable to international efforts to combat environmental exploitation. Yet, most of the targets it will adhere to are nationally formulated ones; so far, the USA has not agreed to any internationally binding environmental regulations such as the Kyoto Protocol.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has made many significant inroads to the promotion of environmentally-friendly policies, both on the national and international levels. The UK played a very active part internationally at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, and in negotiating the Conventions on Climate Change, the Ozone layer and biodiversity. During this period, it also engaged much more actively and constructively with its European partners in pushing forward the European environmental agenda.

On the local level, the UK government has created well-crafted policies on air, water and conservation to minimize the impact of environmental exploitation. Hence, the UK presents a very uniform stance towards environmental issues and will be positive in seeking environmentally-friendly solutions to the world's problems of environmental exploitation.

India

Despite being the world's fourth largest emitter of greenhouse gases, India has exhibited signs of softening its hard-line stances on the environment at the recent Copenhagen Summit. India has pledged to slow the growth of its carbon dioxide emissions over the next decade and beyond as well as reduce its carbon intensity. However, India maintains that its improvements would be made on a voluntary basis, and will not agree to any internationally binding regulation. Hence, India presents a clear and stance on the issue of environmental exploitation pertaining to air pollution.

Brazil

Brazil is keen on cutting down on the rampant deforestation that has taken place in the Amazon rainforest, which is inimical to the indigenous populations dependent on the forests for survival. Furthermore, Brazil seeks to cut down on the exploitation of fossil fuels by adopting a greater use of biofuelled vehicles in the near future. Delegates of Latin American countries should be aware of their stance pertaining to the environment, and may follow Brazil's stance they deem fit.

European Union

The EU considers itself as the vanguard in the fight for environmental protection and against climate change. Its members are largely supportive of internationally-binding instruments that set ambitious targets to be achieved. This general agreement between European leaders was demonstrated in the lead-up to the Copenhagen Summit in 2009.

Africa

African nations do not present a cohesive front as their Latin American or European counterparts do. However they do have one thing in common: the belief that environmental exploitation and degradation is the result of ambitious undertakings carried out by industrialized states with blatant disregard for the environment. Hence, they generally seek to receive compensation for the detriments of environmental exploitation that fall on them. Delegates of African countries should consider the priorities of their respective nations and adopt a stance that suits those priorities best.

China

As a country known for its wanton disregard for environmental concerns, China’s resistance to internationally-binding agreements has been recently demonstrated by its stonewalling tactics at the Copenhagen Summit. China would seek relatively lax international environmental agreements and most of all, would place economic considerations at the top of its priorities.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of Event
December 3, 1968	Adoption of resolution 2398 (XXIII) advocating the convening of a United Nations conference on “problems of the human environment”.
June 5, 1972	United Nations Conference on the Human Environment took place in Stockholm, resulting in the creation of United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)
December 19, 1983	Adoption of Resolution 38/161 welcoming the establishment of a special commission to report on "environment and the global problematique to the year 2000 and beyond".
1987	Completion of the “Brundtland Report” by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)
December 20, 1988	Adoption of resolution 44/228 to convene the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the "Rio Conference" or the "Earth Summit") to "elaborate strategies and measures to halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation".
June 3, 1992	The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) took place in Rio De Janeiro, and led to 3 new developments: The adoption of Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the creation of the Commission for Sustainable Development
December 20, 2000	Adoption of resolution 55/199 convening the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) (also known as "Rio + 10"), a ten-year review of progress achieved since 1992 in the implementation of Agenda 21.
August 26, 2002	The World Summit was held in Johannesburg and its report included a Political Declaration, a set of guiding principles, and the Plan of Implementation

Possible Solutions

Delegates are encouraged to think out of the box for effective measures that will lower the levels of environmental exploitation of all countries in general. Delegates may wish to opt for incentive-based systems, which encourage lesser environmental exploitation and reconstruct the economic value of green technology. Instead of maintaining the current paradigm that green technologies are a burden to firms due to their economic costs, plans can be implemented where corporations are subsidized for their use of such technologies; these subsidies can be compounded in nature, such that the more a firm goes green, the more rewards it will receive. These subsidies can be in differentiated forms as well; instant monetary returns, credit, or tax rebates. In addition to these incentive-based systems, a counter-system of harsher penalties can be imposed on illegal exploitation of the environment. Delegates may consider the use of various penalties such as higher taxes, special environmental taxes, or greater costs incurred by firms that do not cease their exploitative operations.

In coordinating multi-lateral responses to the problems of environmental exploitation, delegates may wish to consider a regional-based approach whereby countries in the region formulate a common strategy to deal with their environmental problems. This would be useful as environmental standards differ greatly from different regions, and a one-size fits all approach in getting countries from all over the world to adopt ambitious targets together have largely failed, as evident from the Copenhagen Summit. Hence, delegates may contemplate the possibility of setting regional goals, or to counter environmental problems and exploitation through regional forums for greater effectiveness. Regional taskforces can also be set up to examine the degree of environmental exploitation within various countries and they can be tasked with setting achievable targets.

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