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Before UNEP: who was in charge of the global environment? The struggle for institutional responsibility 1968–72[†]

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Abstract

Many of the international technical agencies formed after 1945 addressed environmental topics within their specific fields of work. By the late 1960s, a growing awareness of pollution and an emerging environmental movement in Western countries led to a perceived need for more coordinated and institutionalized international cooperation on the environment. Before the landmark United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, and the subsequent creation of the UN Environment Programme, several organizations competed for recognition as principal reference organizations for environmental matters. This article analyses the combination of cooperation and rivalry, involving in particular the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE). Among other initiatives, the OECD became the first international organization to establish a permanent committee specifically dedicated to environmental issues and the ECE organized a Conference on Environmental Problems, held in Prague in 1971. Both called for a critical review of the dominant growth-centred economic model. Their analysis adds a neglected dimension to the origins of today's international structure of environmental cooperation as well as to the long-term evolution of economic environmental thinking.

Keywords: environment; international organizations; NATO; OECD; United Nations

Introduction

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, is conventionally considered ‘the landmark event in the growth of international environmentalism’.¹ It created the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the first international agency specifically dedicated to environmental questions and designed to be the central reference agency for global environmental concerns. After intense debate the agency was located in Nairobi. Its establishment signalled a decision by the governments of the world that the environment was considered sufficiently important to receive an institution of its own. Its name as a ‘programme’ rather than an ‘organization’ acknowledged the continued importance of environmental work in other agencies. Its location highlighted the growing status gained by the Global South. All three dimensions (international environmentalism, institutional decentralization, and the international policy frame) had their own contexts, which explain why the environment became institutionalized in this particular format as well as the resulting consequences.

[†]I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers and the editors of this *Journal* for very helpful comments on an earlier version of the article.

¹John McCormick, *Reclaiming paradise: the global environmental movement*, Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 88.

Of these contexts, the first and the third have been well researched. The tension between industrialized countries in the Global North and low-income countries in the Global South surrounding the Stockholm Conference is well established.² Similarly, the impact of the Cold War on environmental diplomacy has received some scholarly attention, especially with regard to the conflict concerning East German participation at the conference and the initiative of President Nixon to create a Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS).³ Much less is known about the ways in which international negotiations concerning the environment tied into the scenery of international organizations. This absence leaves out an important dimension not only about the developments that did happen but also about a potential alternative turn of events and its possible relevance.

The global history of the last 150 years could be told as a history of international networking, as the world was becoming more complicated, more technical, and more connected. Between 1840 and 1914, 2,897 international gatherings, mostly privately sponsored, were recorded.⁴ In 1910, the First World Congress of International Organizations was attended by 132 institutions.⁵ By 2009, the historian Madeleine Herren could cite 61,100 international organizations.⁶ Though not every organization may be globally significant or influential, they all represent efforts to position a particular topic within a web of stakeholders, their interests, ideologies, and power politics. Part of this process is simply an extension of national foreign policy, as global partnerships and networking have 'often been overwhelmed or redirected by government policies, as nations themselves jostle for space on the world stage and compete to assert their own priorities'.⁷ Frequently, however, such political goals have mixed with more far-reaching concepts. Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas Weiss have tried to capture this multi-level ambiguity with regard to the United Nations: 'Concerning ideas and policies, the UN is a series of governments, secretariats, and individuals who produce them'.⁸

This article looks at how such jostling for political, institutional, and intellectual space played out when the rising status of the environment as a global concern created a new space waiting to be filled. For a few years before 1972, the negotiations between several agencies and member countries unfolded in various attempts to re-align the international agenda. An analysis of sources from the major governments and organizations involved shows that the pre-history of UNEP was more complex than so far realized, entailing not only complicated negotiations between people and interests of the Global North and South, but also between different nations and institutions within the North. These tensions involved specific national and institutional interests but also different ideas regarding what should constitute international environmental

²Michael Manulak, 'Developing world environmental cooperation: the Founex Seminar and the Stockholm Conference', in Wolfram Kaiser and Jan-Henrik Meyer, eds., *International organizations and environmental protection*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017, pp. 103–27; Mostafa Tolba and Osama El-Kholy, *The world environment 1972–1992*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1992, pp. 741–5; Iris Borowy, *Defining sustainable development for our common future: a history of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)*, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 26–36; Maria Ivanova, 'Designing the United Nations Environment Programme: a story of compromise and confrontation', *International Environmental Agreements*, 7, 2007, pp. 337–61; Steven Bernstein, *The compromise of liberal environmentalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 32–47.

³Thorsten Schulz-Walden, *Anfänge globaler Umweltpolitik*, Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013, pp. 149–83; Kai Hüne-mörder, 'Environmental crisis and soft politics: détente and the global environment, 1968–1975', in John McNeill and Corinna Unger, eds., *Environmental histories of the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 257–76.

⁴Frederick Northedge, *The League of Nations, its life and times 1920–1946*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986, p. 16.

⁵Union of International Associations, 'UIA's history', <http://www.uia.org/uia/history.php> (consulted 13 January 2007).

⁶Madeleine Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1885*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009, p. 1.

⁷Barbara Watson Andaya, 'Editorial: networks and individuals in international organizations', *Journal of Global History*, 12, 1, 2017, pp. 1–3.

⁸Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas Weiss, *Ahead of the curve? UN ideas and global challenges*, Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press 2001, p. 205.

work. This article therefore seeks to provide a complementary narrative to the conventional history of the beginning of organized international efforts regarding environmental challenges.

For this purpose, it focuses on a few actors: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE, also ECE), and the governments of the US and the UK. Many other organizations actively included environmental topics in their range of activities, and some may have dedicated more to the field in terms of funding or workforce. However, NATO, the OECD, and the ECE stand apart because they shared an ambition to turn the part of their activities that touched on environmental questions into more than just one more subtopic within their overall line of work. Instead, they toyed with the idea of creating an environmental body of significance in its own right. This goal, pursued at least some of the time, brought them into cooperation as well as competition with one another. Regarding governments, the focus is on the US and Britain: the former because it was the direct promoter of the environmental programme of NATO, the latter because of its leadership in international environmentalism and because of its unusually active policy of coordinating the activities of those three organizations. Collectively, they formed the main players in one strand of pre-1972 manoeuvring for a central reference organization in charge of the environment.

The article relies mainly on public documents and archival sources pertaining to those actors, though additional sources have been integrated as deemed useful. Sometimes, these sources reveal individual people as principal movers. This is certainly true for Janez Stanovnik, the Yugoslavian Executive Secretary of the ECE, and Richard Nixon, President of the United States, and to a lesser extent for Emile van Lennep, the Dutch Secretary-General of the OECD, and rather less so for the Italian Manlio Brosio, Secretary-General of NATO. It is also true for the Canadian Maurice Strong, though his essential role in the preparation of the Stockholm Conference is not the main focus here. But more often dynamics relied not on individuals but on perceived group interests and identities, as the staff of national or international bureaucracies acted on decisions taken in commissions and on views forged in years of identifying with governments or international agencies.

Finally, by focusing on a pathway that eventually receded into the background of world politics, the article also highlights the fact that the ultimate outcome could have taken a different path. Neither the Stockholm Conference nor the subsequent creation of UNEP was a foregone conclusion. In fact, around 1970 the reservations expressed by governments of countries of the Global South regarding the 'green imperialism conference' were sufficiently strong to lead to plans for a boycott. However, this does mean that there would have been no change in the environmental regime of the time. This article argues that, if the Stockholm Conference had not happened and UNEP had not come about, both of which were perfectly plausible possibilities for a while, the world would still have seen the rise of one or several institutions with a claim to international responsibility in the field of environment. But this outcome would have been quite different from what really happened: less global, more Northern, more critical of existing economic systems, potentially more innovative but also more parochial. In addition to tracking the preparations for a development that never happened, this article shows that these events form a strand leading towards the rise of the concept of sustainable development. It thereby contributes to the history of international environmentalism a component that thus far has largely been missing from the picture.

Background: the emergence of the environment as an issue of international policy

Considerations by policy-makers and citizens about environmental degradation beyond borders date back centuries, and are usually tied to economic concerns concerning vanishing resources, notably through deforestation, overgrazing, or whaling. These fears gave rise to conservationism, designed to safeguard the natural resources on which economic activity relied. A similar conservationist approach guided the approach to perceived losses of wilderness and valued

landscapes. The first national parks were founded in North America and Australia after 1870, and by 1910 nature conservation societies had emerged in most Western countries.⁹

Discussions on an international scale began in the early twentieth century. Arguably the first sizeable meeting was the 1913 Conference for the International Protection of Nature (*Weltnaturschutzkonferenz*) in Bern, Switzerland, dominated by the Swiss pioneering ecologist Paul Sarasin. After the First World War, the League of Nations engaged in projects regarding oil pollution, animal protection, pesticide use, and marine wildlife conservation. In 1948 the International Union for the Protection of Nature was created (IUPN, renamed International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, IUCN, in 1956). However, it is only in hindsight that these activities appear as components of the same interest or even as intrinsically related. Contemporaries conceived of them in terms of protecting animals, natural beauty, or human health, not as environmental policies.¹⁰ Accordingly, when the system of international organizations was put in place after the Second World War, the environment was not considered. There was no pre-war agency on which to build. However, nervousness about seemingly disappearing raw materials and landscapes was sufficiently strong to provoke two large international conferences in 1949: the US-inspired United Nations Scientific Conference on the Conservation and Use of Resources, which focused on the conservation of resources as a technical and political challenge, and the International Technical Conference for the Protection of Nature, organized by UNESCO and by the recently established IUPN, which addressed the preservation of nature as a moral and aesthetic concern. But such activities did not result in the institutionalization of organizations specifically devoted to the topic of conservation.¹¹ Indeed, for years they remained limited and fragmented, appealing only to a fringe group of people. In cases of conflict, environmental concerns inevitably took second place to economic goals.¹²

The situation changed with the emergence of a dedicated environmental movement in Western countries in the 1960s. A series of high-profile environmental scandals such as smog episodes in Donora, Pennsylvania (1948), London (1952), and Los Angeles (1954), the contamination of Minamata Bay in Japan with mercury in the 1950s and 1960s, and the phenomenon of acid rain in northern Europe, as well as the publication of Rachel Carson's best-selling book *The silent spring*, 1962, gave rise to a discourse in Western countries that saw these various crises as part of larger systemic problems related to prevalent methods of production and consumption.¹³ In response, several governments took end-of-pipe measures, such as legislation to restrict air and water pollution, and began establishing environmental ministries or departments.¹⁴ Some people went further, calling into question various manifestations of industrialized economies, while the core of the modern world's developmental system was predicated on ongoing economic growth. This strand produced a series of books, including Fairfield Osborn's *Our plundered planet*, published in 1948, the best-selling and highly controversial *Limits to growth*, commissioned by the Club of Rome and published in 1972, and Herman Daly's *Toward a steady-state economy* of 1973.¹⁵ Thus, environmentalism entailed a built-in ambiguity, shifting

⁹John McNeill, *Something new under the sun*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 336–7.

¹⁰Jan-Henrik Meyer, 'From nature to environment: international organizations and environmental protection before Stockholm', in Kaiser and Meyer, *International Organizations*, pp. 31–83.

¹¹Anna-Katharina Wöbse, "'The world after all was one': the international environmental network of UNESCO and IUPN", *Contemporary European History*, 20, 3, 2011, pp. 331–48; Thomas Jundt, 'Dueling visions for the postwar world: the UN and UNESCO 1949 conferences on resources and nature, and the origins of environmentalism', *Journal of American History*, 101, 1, 2014, pp. 44–70.

¹²McNeill, *Something new*, pp. 336–7.

¹³Sabine Höhler, *Spaceship earth in the environmental age, 1960–1990*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015.

¹⁴Bill Long, *International environmental issues and the OECD, 1950–2000*, Paris: OECD, 2000, p. 13; Gary Haw and Alistair Paul, *Environmentalism since 1945*, London: Routledge 2012, pp. 3–8.

¹⁵Fairfield Osborn, *Our plundered planet*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1948; Herman Daly, *Toward a steady-state economy*, San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman, 1973.

between, on the one hand, environmental policies designed to maintain an existing economic system and, on the other, policies intended to replace or at least fundamentally transform this system.

Many of the technical agencies that made up the increasingly elaborate system of international organizations after 1945 addressed issues that touched on environmental concerns, whether with regard to agriculture, pesticides, and forest (the Food and Agricultural Organization), health (the World Health Organization), weather (the World Meteorological Organization), or others. By early 1970, basically all international organizations were known to have addressed or to be planning to incorporate environmental questions into their work. A large majority dealt with the various effects of air and water pollution.¹⁶

Gradually, some agencies began establishing more comprehensive environmental programmes. The European Communities (EC), the Council of Europe (Council), the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA or Comecon), NATO, the OECD, and the ECE were cases in point. They all shared some characteristics that made them important players, both in international politics and in the global environment: they were intergovernmental organizations and their members were mostly – though not entirely – European countries. They included the world's largest industrial nations and, consequently, the world's largest polluters.¹⁷ They also included the main participants of the East–West conflict, which meant that these developments became entangled in Cold War configurations.

The question of the representation of East Germany famously complicated any international meeting, including those dedicated to environmental issues, though, at the time, environmental discussions were arguably more influenced by efforts towards detente. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the secret visit of Henry Kissinger to Beijing in 1971 followed by President Nixon's a year later, and the signing of the SALT I agreement regarding disarmament in 1972 were all indications of attempts by policy-makers in East and West to ease tensions. This political climate also facilitated negotiations about a major conference on security, which would take place in July 1973 as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and also gave rise to the Helsinki process, designed to materially increase East–West cooperation. In this situation, seemingly apolitical issues like the environment appeared to be a propitious area where contacts and cooperation across Cold War lines could be created. In short, environmental threats offered themselves 'as a vehicle for normalizing international relations'.¹⁸

Though other international organizations were also involved, the broad membership and support of the OECD, the ECE, and NATO meant that they found themselves at the forefront of initiatives to position the environment within organized international cooperation. Two, the OECD and the ECE, were fundamentally in charge of economic concerns, a plausible background given the close connection between economic activities and the environment. Somewhat less evidently connected to environmental concerns, NATO was a military agency. The membership of NATO and the OECD showed substantial overlap (all NATO members were also members of OECD, while the OECD also included non-NATO countries: Austria, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Australia, Finland, and, after 1973, New Zealand). The ECE included countries of western Europe, as well as communist countries from the Soviet Block in central and eastern Europe, and the USA.

The beginnings: the early phase of environmental work at the ECE, the OECD, and NATO

The ECE was created in 1947 as a regional economic office of the UN. Much of its conceptual work was done by a working group of senior economic advisers. Though its practical significance

¹⁶Archives of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (henceforth OECD), ENV (70)3, Ad Hoc Preparatory Committee on the Activities of the Organisation on Environmental Problems Related to Economic Growth, 'Note on the work of other international organisations on environmental problems', 27 February 1970.

¹⁷Forest Gieves, 'Regional efforts at international environmental protection', *International Lawyer*, 12, 2, 1978, p. 310.

¹⁸Hünemörder, 'Environmental crisis'.

was severely limited by the East–West conflict, which divided its members, it issued important studies on economic growth, distribution of income, and overall economic perspectives, and engaged in projects to increase industrial and trade cooperation.¹⁹ This work led it to be the first of the three organizations to become interested in environmental topics. As early as the 1950s, water pollution was discussed in its Inland Transport Committee, as the water transportation sector was concerned that it would be blamed for river pollution, adding to its difficulties competing with rail transport. In 1968, this work was expanded into a newly established Committee on Water Problems. Similarly, in 1963 the Coal Committee began addressing pollution problems in order to defend the prestige of coal compared to oil, while the Committee on Housing, Building and Planning was considering issues of human settlement. While the focus of most ECE environmental projects was on various facets of water and air pollution, others addressed additional issues such as irrigation, land clearance and restoration, afforestation, utilization of waste products from the coal industry, and noise pollution. Gradually, the ECE developed a more comprehensive approach and, in 1967, it convened a meeting of senior national officials designed to plan studies on overall European regional environmental issues. In that context, the Czechoslovak government suggested holding a conference of governmental experts in 1971 to take a comprehensive look at long-term environmental challenges in the ECE region.²⁰

Organizing a conference was a standard method of upgrading and lending coherence to international environmental cooperation. The same method was used by UNESCO and the IUCN, which organized a second conference, after the first one in 1949 mentioned above. An Intergovernmental Conference of Experts on the Scientific Basis for the Rational Use and Conservation of the Resources of the Biosphere took place in 1968 and gave rise to the Man and the Biosphere Programme, launched in 1971.²¹ Also in 1968, Swedish diplomats managed to transform plans for a fourth conference on atomic energy into a first international conference on the human environment. The invitation to hold this conference in Stockholm in 1972 came with the assurance by the Swedish ambassador to the UN that no new institutional arrangements would result from it.²² Meanwhile, the ECE Executive Secretary, Janez Stanovnik, proposed establishing a Senior Environmental Advisors Group. This group was to be modelled after the senior economic advisers to ECE countries, so, while not creating a new institution, it substantially increased the standing of the environment within ECE work, giving it a status similar to the central purpose of the ECE.²³

Thus, from 1969 onwards, there were preparations for two large-scale environmental conferences, one on a global, the other on a regional scale, and both with an implicit suggestion of more long-term developments to come. Initially, the idea of the Stockholm Conference elicited little enthusiasm. Officers at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) felt that it might be an important meeting but that its topic was too vague and its scope far too large.²⁴ The reaction in Washington was even more muted. In November 1969, the Acting Secretary for the Interior, Russell Train, sent a concerned letter to the Under Secretary of State Elliot Richardson, urging him to take steps for more ostensive US enthusiasm about the conference, lest the United

¹⁹Yves Berthelot and Paul Rayment, 'The ECE: a bridge between East and West', in Yves Berthelot, ed., *Unity and diversity in development ideas*, Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 51–131.

²⁰Grievies, 'Regional efforts', p. 323; Yves Berthelot and Paul Rayment, *Looking back and peering forward: a short history of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 1947–2007*, New York and Geneva: UN, 2007, p. 80; United Nations Office at Geneva Archives (hereafter UNOGA), G 34/1, J.2, Revised text of relevant part of document E/4553 concerning ECE environmental activities, April 1969.

²¹Lutz Möller and Eva Kammann, 'MAB: man and the biosphere', *UNESCO today*, 2, 2007, pp. 13–15.

²²Ivanova, 'Designing', pp. 341–5.

²³The National Archives of the United Kingdom (henceforth TNA), FCO 55/383, British embassy Washington to Foreign and Commonwealth Office (henceforth FCO), 3 April 1970.

²⁴TNA, FCO 55/171, Summary record of a meeting held at the FCO, 6 November 1969.

States end up 'being cast in an essentially negative role in a field where we should be exercising positive international leadership'.²⁵ In addition, the global scale of the proposed event weakened instead of strengthening its appeal. Low-income countries of the South resented the growing concern about pollution in the North and suspected that acting on ecological warnings of environmental degradation was 'at best premature and at worst a neo-colonial plot to retard necessary economic development'.²⁶ As a growing number of countries, especially in Latin America, threatened to boycott the conference in 1970, Maurice Strong was appointed as the new secretary-general and organizer. He proceeded to transform the event into one with a strong focus on the connection between environment and development.²⁷

Meanwhile, the European conference of the ECE remained focused on environmental problems caused by increasing production and consumption. Initiated earlier and independently, it had a certain claim to seniority and its staff underscored the pioneering character of its conference while belittling the global scale of the Stockholm Conference as one that was 'concentrating on problems of developing countries'.²⁸ From December 1969 onwards, in preparation for the Prague Conference, numerous governments sent country reports on 'problems relating to the environment' to the ECE, sometimes voluminous, and often being the first time that these countries had addressed their environmental developments.²⁹ Though these reports had originally been an ECE idea, they became inevitably tied to preparations for the Stockholm Conference, which also asked participating governments and UN specialized agencies to provide information regarding work presently being done in the field of human environment.³⁰ Increasingly, to avoid the risk of seeming superfluous, Stanovnik portrayed the ECE meeting as complementary rather than as competition to the Stockholm Conference, going out of his way to emphasize that the Prague meeting would not duplicate work designed for Stockholm.³¹ In preparation for its 1971 conference, the ECE organized several meetings, inviting representatives of various governments and institutions, including the OECD.³²

This invitation was unavoidable because the OECD was similarly in a process of creating environmental expertise. Much like the ECE, the OEEC/OECD³³ had begun addressing some environmental topics by establishing a Committee for Applied Research in 1957, which initiated several small-scale studies on industrial water and air pollution. After 1961, it continued these studies as the Committee for Scientific Research, renamed the Committee for Research Cooperation in 1966. It was intended that research and information-sharing would provide recommendations to decision-makers regarding social and economic policies.³⁴ The Directorate for Scientific Affairs was supported by an Environmental Research Division, whose various advisory and study groups addressed water quality, motor vehicle exhaust and sulphur products,

²⁵Train to Richardson, 17 November 1969, Foreign Relations of the United States (henceforth FRUS) 1969–76, vol. E-1, doc. 288, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve01/d288> (consulted 19 December 2017).

²⁶Manulak, 'Developing', p. 106.

²⁷Iris Borowy, *Defining*, pp. 31–4.

²⁸UNOGA, G 34/1, J.2, Reiner to Mishan, 28 April 1969.

²⁹See UNOGA, GX34/2.

³⁰UN Res 2398, 3 December 1968, §2, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=a/res/2398\(XXIII\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=a/res/2398(XXIII)) (consulted 20 January 2017).

³¹TNA, FCO 55/422, Note by Ministry of Housing and Local Government, ECE, 25th Session, 20 March 1970.

³²UNOGA, G 34/1, J.2, de Groot van Embden, OECD, to Stanovnik, UNECE, 31 January 1969.

³³Founded as the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) in 1948, it was renamed the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1961.

³⁴OECD, ENV (70)4, 'Present status of work of the Committee for Research Cooperation and other OECD bodies relating to the environment', 4 March 1970; Long, *International environmental issues*, pp. 28–31; Iris Borowy, 'Negotiating the environment: the making of the OECD Environment Committee and the polluter pays principle, 1968–1972', in Mathieu Leimgruber and Matthias Schmelzer, eds., *The OECD and the international political economy since 1948*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2017, pp. 311–34.

pesticides, and urban management.³⁵ In this way, the OECD began compiling information mainly about water and air pollution, urban development, and transportation.³⁶

The early environmental efforts of both the ECE and the OECD were mainly driven by pressure from the public in several European countries to reduce air pollution and by tangible sector interest in information-sharing. However, by the late 1960s, both organizations took a broader view. Specifically, both confronted the fundamental dilemma of how to reconcile an economy, which was predicated on mass production, consumption, and disposal as well as economic growth, with safeguarding essential environmental benefits. It befell an unnamed ECE staff member, in February 1969, to be one of the first to define the key challenge, which would shape discussions in future years:

We need to consider the cost of economic growth also in terms of environmental deterioration and in terms of efforts required to reverse the trend. In doing this, we should try to develop a concept of overall or total costs to society i.e. both to individuals and to the community, to industry and to governments; in other words, to the society as a whole. It might prove difficult politically to give up apparent 'immediate' benefits for long-term environmental gains; in other words, to pay today for benefits which may be realized only tomorrow. But neither can we impose on future generations the huge price of cumulative neglect of our environment.³⁷

This text was in line with a simultaneous initiative by the OECD Secretary-General Thor kil Kristensen (and may actually have been written by him). In September 1969, he introduced a lengthy position paper at the OECD Ministerial Council entitled 'Problems of a modern society', in which he discussed in some detail how the unprecedented economic growth of the 1960s had led to rising living standards, as well as extensive problems of environmental destruction and social fragmentation.³⁸ Kristensen's successor, Emile van Lennep, enthusiastically followed up on this initiative. Listing various manifestations of social and environmental problems, his own note declared a widespread feeling in OECD countries that rapid economic growth, though welcomed, entailed new problems and raised new questions. It also argued that the OECD should reflect these considerations in its work and adopt these issues within its work programme.³⁹ This paper triggered lively debates both in the OECD Council and in the Secretariat, and soon the focus concentrated on the environment as the comparatively less sensitive and complicated issue.⁴⁰ Clearly, the OECD was prepared to adopt the environment as a new major component of its work.

Almost simultaneously, the US President, Richard Nixon, took an eerily similar initiative. In April 1969, he proposed that NATO should address the problems of modern society, including environmental problems.⁴¹ In July of the same year, the NATO Council created an open-ended Preparatory Committee to explore terms of reference and methods of work of a 'proposed Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society'.⁴² Nixon's unilateral move bewildered the NATO Secretary-General, Manlio Brosio, and caught allies by surprise.⁴³ Several NATO members resented the move, assuming that it was a step taken for domestic reasons in order to

³⁵Long, *International environmental issues*, pp. 30–1.

³⁶Homer Angelo, 'Protection of the human environment: first steps towards regional cooperation in Europe', *International Lawyer*, 5, 3, 1971, p. 514.

³⁷UNOGA, G 34/1, J.2, 'Some notes or points for possible use in the Executive Secretary's opening statement to the preparatory group of experts on environment', stamped by UN Registry, 6 February 1969, p. 14.

³⁸OECD, C(69)123, 'Problems of a modern society. Note by the Secretary-General', 18 September 1969.

³⁹OECD, C(69)168, 'Problems of a modern society. Note by the Secretary-General', 12 December 1969.

⁴⁰Iris Borowy, '(Re-)thinking environment and economy: the OECD and sustainable development', in Kaiser and Meyer, *International organizations*, pp. 211–39.

⁴¹NATO Archives (henceforth NATOA), C-M(70)19(Final), Progress Report by the Chairman of the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society, 15 May 1970.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Jacob Darwin Hamblin, 'Environmentalism for the Atlantic Alliance: NATO's experiment with the "Challenges of modern society"', *Environmental History*, 15, 2010, p. 55.

counter anti-Vietnam War protest, or a strategy to force them into a closer connection with the US.⁴⁴ Other observers suspected different motives: to reinvigorate an alliance suffering from internal divisions regarding cost allocation and leadership; to increase the perceived utility of NATO to win over sceptical governments; or to keep the control over the issue within this small group of Western countries, excluding, in particular, the societies in Southern countries.⁴⁵ It may also have been just one additional measure by which Nixon tried to make use of the new environmental concern and concomitant votes by presenting himself as the 'environmental president'.⁴⁶ Indeed, at a moment when the ECE and the OECD were already developing their environmental commissions, it was difficult to see why there should be a need for yet another such commission. The delegates from Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland in the OECD Committee for Research Cooperation proved particularly critical of the scheme.⁴⁷ More pragmatically, the British tried to shift the focus of the work of the new NATO commission towards social concerns in order to minimize overlap with the existing work on the physical environment by international organizations.⁴⁸

The NATO Preparatory Commission devised two central methods of work: pilot studies and fellowships. Fellowships were granted to scholars to study specific problems. Pilot studies were proposed by member countries on topics of particular interest to them. If they found support as well as the pro forma acceptance of the NATO Council, they would be responsible for the organization of the studies, including defining the research questions and organizing meetings and other events. These pilot countries would also be in charge of financing and providing the necessary personnel for the projects. At the end of the project, the pilot countries would present the results to the newly created responsible body, the CCMS, and to the Council of Ministers, who would then decide whether to recommend the conclusions to all NATO members for implementation.⁴⁹ The expectation was that the results of these studies would find their way into national policy and legislation.⁵⁰ It was a pragmatic format: it allowed the member countries to propose studies in which they were interested and probably would have carried out anyway as NATO contributions, while the CCMS could claim studies as its own for little extra effort.⁵¹

In December 1969, the CCMS had its first meeting and adopted three pilot studies: on coastal water pollution (Belgium as pilot country), air pollution (USA), and inland water pollution (Canada).⁵² As a result of this 'highly successful first meeting', the US State Department saw the 'great majority of NATO membership now firmly committed to and actively engaged in work of CCMS'.⁵³ This was true to the extent that most countries did, indeed, contribute funds and studies to CCMS work. However, the cooperation appears to have been tactical rather than committed. Even in September 1970, the German federal foreign minister for environmental questions informed his British colleague of the goal of his government to focus on the EEC because it offered a counterweight to the USA.⁵⁴

⁴⁴Patrick Kyba, 'CCMS: the environmental connection', *International Journal*, 29, 2, 1974, pp. 256–67.

⁴⁵Charles F. Doran, 'Can NATO defend the environment?', *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review*, 2, 4, 1973, pp. 670–1.

⁴⁶Hamblin, 'Environmentalism', p. 55.

⁴⁷Research Study REUS-7 prepared by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 14 April 1970, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve01/d296> (consulted 19 December 2017).

⁴⁸TNA, FCO 55/171, Audland to Killick, Human Environment, 3 November 1969.

⁴⁹Kyba, 'CCMS', pp. 256–8.

⁵⁰Grieves, 'Regional efforts', p. 316.

⁵¹Hamblin, 'Environmentalism', pp. 57, 60.

⁵²Russell Train, 'A new approach to international environmental cooperation: the NATO Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society', *Kansas Law Review*, 22, 1974, pp. 174–80.

⁵³Department of State (DOS) to NATO Mission, 4 February 1970, FRUS 1969–76, vol. E-1, doc. 290, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve01/d290> (consulted 17 December 2017).

⁵⁴TNA, FCO 55/384, Lambert, British embassy Bonn, to Wheeler, FCO, 28 September 1970.

Struggling for institutional positions

At the time it was unclear where this surging environmental activism might be headed. For a while, the British FCO remained sceptical as to whether this sudden international interest in the environmental would prove more than a temporary fad. The minutes of a meeting of August 1969 noted drily: 'While it is not yet conclusively established that international discussion of these problems will prove effective and rewarding enough to remain a permanent feature of the international scene, it seems certain that the next few years will see a marked growth of attempts in this direction.'⁵⁵

In fact, there could be little doubt about the last point. Inexorably, the environment was gaining ground within international organizations, and national governments faced the question of how to react to a situation of rising demands for funding, attention and expertise. Indeed, the British FCO observed this development without enthusiasm, pointing out the 'undesirability of a proliferation of discussion in international bodies which may lead to duplication of effort and unreasonable demands on the time of the appropriate experts and risk achieving [*sic*] no positive results'.⁵⁶ However, it seemed politically impossible to completely opt out of this growing number of meetings and conferences. Therefore, in August 1969 the British government formed a working party charged with studying and recommending ways to coordinate related policies. It also contacted other governments, inquiring how they were dealing with this question.⁵⁷ In this regard Britain seemed more advanced than other countries. To the British it appeared as if most governments had an incoherent assortment of domestic environmental policies, and almost none seemed to have given any thought to the question of coordinating the policies of international organizations.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the US State Department saw the growth of environmental groups not as a wasteful duplication of effort but as the building blocks of an elaborate strategy. As a State Department circular cable explained, it planned to advance its 'objectives initially in NATO subsequently in OECD and thereafter in the ECE'.⁵⁹

The connection between the three agencies followed a simple rationale: for various reasons, CCMS formed the core of Nixon's foreign environmental policy, including, as Under Secretary of State Richardson, argued: 'the intimacy of our relationships with the NATO Allies, their weight in world affairs, the gravity of environmental problems that we and most of them face, and the extent of the material and human resources that we and they can bring to bear jointly on these problems'.⁶⁰ However, the international spread of many environmental problems meant that NATO offered an inadequate framework within which such issues could be addressed. In view of its membership across Cold War lines, the ECE seemed a better fit, and it was therefore in US interests to strengthen this agency and upgrade its activities. Assuming that Eastern Bloc countries would not be overly receptive to ideas originating from NATO, the State Department proposed the OECD as a buffer, making use of its already existing connection with the ECE in the field. Thus, in between the staunchly Western NATO and the mixed ECE, the OECD should take a 'follow-up role in coordinating Western efforts'.⁶¹

⁵⁵TNA, FCO 55/170, 'Working Party on the Co-ordination of Environmental Pollution Control: international aspects of the problem', note by the FCO, 29 August 1969.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷TNA, FCO 55/170, FCO to various embassies, 28 August 1969.

⁵⁸TNA, FCO 55/170, British High Commission Canberra to FCO, 8 September 1969; British embassy Paris to FCO, 15 September 1969; British embassy Bonn to FCO, 16 September 1969; British embassy Stockholm to FCO, 17 September 1969; UK delegation to OECD, 19 September 1969; British embassy Washington, 22 September 1969; British embassy Rome to FCO, 11 September 1969.

⁵⁹US State Department to US missions at NATO, UNECE, and UNESCO, 24 February 1970, FRUS 1969–76, vol. E-1, doc. 291, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve01/d291> (consulted 19 December 2017).

⁶⁰US State Department to US mission at NATO, 6 March 1970, FRUS 1969–76, vol. E-1, doc. 292, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve01/d292> (consulted 19 Dec 2017).

⁶¹*Ibid.*

However, when the US Secretary of State, William Rogers, informed the allied countries of this strategy and urged them to attend the 1971 ECE conference at ministerial level, the response was not positive. The delegates of other member states insisted such a strategy required prior discussions between allies. Besides, the Belgian representative admitted to conflicting plans, namely for making use of the intra-systemic qualities of the environment for the upcoming European Security Conference.⁶² In a subsequent four-page letter, designed to win over the NATO partners to its plans, the State Department backed Stanovnik's idea for a Senior Environmental Advisors Group at the ECE.⁶³ This was a new point, which suggested that the US would support an ECE bid for a more permanent role in international environmental work.

Generally, the British agreed that the ECE was 'well placed to deal with physical environmental problems common to East and West European countries'. However, instead of relying on the CCMS, the British preferred the OECD as the place for forging Western positions, while keeping a safe distance from the ECE in order to 'resist pressure by the Soviet Union for membership of OECD'.⁶⁴ This attitude was problematic, since, as the Canadian delegate commented frankly, for his country the idea of giving the task of using the environment to improve East–West relations to the OECD removed the only argument in favour of supporting the CCMS.⁶⁵ Indeed, the suggestion by the UK that the OECD should be responsible for coordinating Western policies on the environment was not received with any enthusiasm when the idea was floated in NATO, where the British found themselves under considerable US pressure to support the CCMS. Diplomatically, it seemed important that the UK should not appear more negative than the other Europeans about the American proposal.⁶⁶ In practice, the British strategy entailed safeguarding a means of East–West cooperation regarding transboundary environmental problems while fighting off both US efforts to privilege NATO as a dominant environmental institution and Soviet efforts to gain a foothold in the OECD via their participation in environmental projects of the ECE. Apparently, it was difficult to resist US pressure. By the spring of 1970, the British had largely come around to the US view: the CCMS would propose issues to be discussed with eastern European countries and the OECD would be used to coordinate Western views, while the ECE would provide the platform for such discussions.⁶⁷

These arguments are noteworthy because the environment was regarded purely for its negotiating value with Eastern Bloc countries. In stark contrast to the Stockholm Conference context, where environmental considerations were dividing countries from the North and the South, the topic promised a uniting effect in an East–West framework. However, this was not how the leading officials at the organizations in question viewed the issue. Instead, they were most intent on creating and defending space for manoeuvre and influence for their respective agencies. Here, the political support, institutional stature, and perceived significance of their activities became theoretically distinct but in fact closely intertwined.

In August 1970, the Council of Europe established an inventory of environmental programmes existing in international organizations. It revealed that the OECD, the ECE, the EC, and NATO, as well as the Council of Europe itself, had all become engaged in issues concerning water and air pollution and that, between them, they also addressed pesticides, environmental management, transport, and education. In addition, UNESCO, the ECE, and the UN had all held or were going to hold large environmental conferences.⁶⁸ The question of which work was carried

⁶²TNA, FCO 55/383, UK delegation NATO to FCO, 17 March 1970 and 26 March 1970.

⁶³TNA, FCO 55/383, British embassy Washington to FCO, 3 April 1970.

⁶⁴TNA, FCO 55/422, 'Summary record of a meeting held in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on Wednesday, 1 April, 1970, at 11 a.m.'

⁶⁵TNA, FCO 55/383, UK delegation NATO to FCO, 26 March 1970.

⁶⁶TNA, FCO 55/422, 'Summary record of a meeting held in the FCO'.

⁶⁷TNA, FCO, 55/422, 'Section for brief no. 1', speaking notes (n.d.) and background notes, spring 1970.

⁶⁸TNA, FCO 55/384, Council of Europe, Inventory of other International Organisations' Activities Regarding the Environment, CM (70)130, 28 August 1970.

out by each organization and how much authority each exercised was becoming important, not only for governments that wanted to avoid inefficient duplications, but also as arguments within a larger struggle for institutional clout as an international reference agency overseeing the environmental agenda.

At the ECE, this issue was discussed as early as April 1969. While inviting the cooperation of Edward (Ezra) Mishan, a professor at the London School of Economics and author of the critique of the current economic system *The costs of economic growth*, for the upcoming Prague Conference, the ECE officer B. F. Reiner explained that the ECE intended to concentrate on the environmental aspects of economic planning and governmental policies, strategies, and organizational arrangements in different countries.⁶⁹ This focus on the economic–environmental interface was as revealing as the request for support by Mishan, a prominent critic of a growth-centred economic system. The argument that the ECE’s status as an economic organization gave it a central role in environmental debates found some support. Several participants at an April 1970 ECE meeting pointed out the special competence of the ECE in discussing the environment as a topic of international affairs.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the preparatory meetings for the Prague Conference offered a platform for Stanovnik to present his vision of the ECE as the dominant regional agency for environmental work. Promoting the environmental credentials of his institution, he stressed the ‘comprehensive nature’ of ECE activities, which included the most technologically advanced countries belonging to different economic systems. He also suggested ambitious plans for conceptual work that questioned central tenets of the existing model, reflecting his belief in ‘a gradual but definite shift from the quantitative to the qualitative aspects of economic growth and living standards’.⁷¹ Echoing almost identical views to those already discussed by Van Lennep at the OECD, Stanovnik declared that ‘a deliberate effort had to be made to go beyond short-term economic gains, to abandon the narrow sectoral approach and to adopt comprehensive, systematic and long-term policies related to environmental problems as a whole’.⁷²

Ironically, similar arguments were being raised in support of the OECD. Specifically, the head of the Directorate for Scientific Affairs, Alexander King, argued that its economic character qualified the OECD to become the central coordinating organization for environmental issues.⁷³ To study the issue, the OECD created a ‘Preparatory committee on the activities of the OECD on environmental problems related to economic growth’. This committee declared that the OECD was particularly qualified to study economic aspects of environmental problems since it was a homogeneous body of industrialized countries where environmental problems were acute, and it could rely both on its experience in economic studies and on the support of a well-established secretariat. Working topics should be selected partly on factual grounds: their urgency for member countries, the magnitude of foreseeable economic consequences, and the need for government action. Other aspects were more clearly related to how they might strengthen the OECD as an institution: the relevance of the issue for cooperation between OECD member states, pre-existing work on the topic at the OECD and its absence in other international organizations, and the capacity of the OECD to effectively address the issue and to link it to its overall work on economic growth.⁷⁴ Indeed, the OECD had for some years been a hotbed of debates regarding

⁶⁹UNOGA, G 34/1, J.2, Reiner to Mishan, 28 April 1969.

⁷⁰UNOGA, G 34/1, J.2, ECE, 24th session, ‘Provisional summary record of the eleventh meeting, held 17 April 1969’, p. 3.

⁷¹UNOGA, G 34/3, ECE news release ECE/HOU 134, ‘UN/ECE prepares for regional meeting on the environment in 1971’, 16 March 1970.

⁷²TNA, FCO 55/423, UNECE, ‘Report of the second meeting of the preparatory group for the meeting of governmental experts on problems relating to environment’, 20 March 1970.

⁷³OECD, CE/M(70)2 (Prov.), Executive Committee, ‘Summary record of the 228th meeting held 27–28 January 1970’, 17 February 1970.

⁷⁴OECD, ENV(70)5, Ad Hoc Preparatory Committee on the Activities of the Organisation on Environmental Problems Related to Economic Growth, annotated agenda, 26 February 1970.

what should be the reasonable goals of economic development as ever-increasing economic activity seemed to cause systemically destabilizing environmental destruction. In fact, numerous OECD officials, including King and Secretary-General Thorkil Kristensen, were among the founding members of the Club of Rome and actively contributed to discussions that formed the intellectual basis for the *Limits to growth* study, published in 1972.⁷⁵ Thus, the OECD credentials for critical thinking regarding the environment–economics nexus were as good as or better than those of the ECE.

There were traces of similar thinking at NATO as well, since two members of its Science Committee were also members of the Club of Rome.⁷⁶ But on the whole, the main concern appears to have focused on institutional standing rather than on tangible environmental risks. Thus, Secretary-General Brosio, though initially sceptical about the CCMS, soon rejected the idea of restricting its potential field of work by agreeing to a distribution of questions between NATO and the Council of Europe.⁷⁷ He also disapproved of Stanovnik's apparent plan 'to make the ECE the centre for all environmental studies', insisting that 'NATO, the Council of Europe and OECD would not wish to have all their activities in this sphere pre-empted by the ECE'.⁷⁸ However, in this increasingly crowded space, simply ignoring other players was not helpful. In early March 1970, the Political Affairs Committee at the Council of Europe invited the heads and leading representatives of NATO and the OECD to discuss the question of overlap. The meeting was friendly enough. All agreed that there was a need for more contact and cooperation, and also that their organizations were so different that the risk of work overlap was small. But the meeting also showed the limits of such an amicable distribution of work. Given the limited number both of national experts and of basic environmental issues, some overlap was unavoidable.⁷⁹

Observing the situation from London, an official in the Science and Technology Department of the FCO commented that the OECD, the ECE, and the NATO were 'tripping over themselves to get onto the environmental bandwagon'. Comparing their relative strengths and weaknesses, he appeared critical of what he viewed as Stanovnik's adoption of the same position as Van Lennep at the OECD, and also of the US policy which seemed 'more interested in a political East/West dividend than in practical results'.⁸⁰ Clearly, at this stage, negotiations involved a messy combination of institutional, political, scientific, and personal interests. In addition, there were already indications that plans for environmental organizations that ignored Southern interests simultaneously ignored evolving global power relations. Thus, the proposal by the US diplomat George Kennan to situate a new environmental organization outside the UN, suggested in a *Foreign Affairs* article in April 1970, provoked vehement protests from developing countries.⁸¹

In June 1970, Stanovnik presented a different strategy to strengthen the position of the ECE: he argued that, if the OECD and the communist CMEA coordinated their positions separately, there was the risk that the two sides would end up with different standards in a counter-productive way. Instead, he suggested that the OECD and CMEA secretariats could keep the ECE informed of their plans so that the latter could 'act as a go-between and attempt to harmonize work being carried out in the sub-regional groups'.⁸² His proposal may have been prompted by rumours about the imminent creation of a new coordinating body for environment. Various ideas for such a body, including a committee of the UN General Assembly or a new council

⁷⁵Matthias Schmelzer, "'Born in the corridors of the OECD": the forgotten origins of the Club of Rome, transnational networks, and the 1970s in global history', *Journal of Global History*, 12, 2017, pp. 26–48.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁷TNA, FCO 55/383, Burrows to Flower, 11 March 1970.

⁷⁸TNA, FCO 55/422, UK Delegation NATO to FCO, 9 April 1970.

⁷⁹TNA, FCO 55/383, Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, Political Affairs Committee, Minutes of the meeting held in Paris 6 and 7 April 1970.

⁸⁰TNA, FCO 55/422, Science and Technology Department, 31 March 1970.

⁸¹Ivanova, 'Designing', pp. 347–9.

⁸²TNA, FCO 55/384, Butler, UK delegation ECE, to FCO, 26 June 1970.

similar to the Trusteeship Council, were floating around the international circuit. The British were opposed to a new specialized agency and, not surprisingly, so was Stanovnik.⁸³ Instead, he actively propagated his idea of establishing ‘Senior Advisers to ECE Governments on Environmental Problems’, as a permanent environmental body within ECE.

The idea was strongly supported by the US, and moderately by the Italian and Swedish delegates, but rejected by the French for financial reasons.⁸⁴ In the ongoing scramble for advantages in the field, the move was defensive more than hegemonic, as the British mission to the ECE reported:

In informal conversation with Anne Warburton [UK counsellor, Geneva Mission to the United Nations] last week Stanovnik emphasized very strongly his view that the ECE needed a permanent body concerned with the environment – it did not matter whether they were called Advisers or something else. He would require no more staff or money: it was his intention to take four officers off work on coal and transfer them to environment. His argument for the immediate need for a permanent body was that without it all other international organisations would leave the ECE standing. This was not just empire-building: his particular point, which seems to us to have some validity, was that if other organisations are seen to expand while the ECE is not, he will lose staff to the faster moving organisations.⁸⁵

Given the considerations by national governments to streamline their engagement in competing international organizations, he may have been right. However, the British government still clearly preferred the OECD, and an officer of the Science and Technology Department of the FCO commented that to the extent that the ECE intended ‘to trespass on OECD’s territory’ it would have to be put ‘on the right track’.⁸⁶

Meanwhile, the OECD pursued a strategy of establishing an infrastructure of environmental working groups. One of these, the Sub-committee of Economic Experts, engaged in discussions about the weakness of market approaches to the environment, including, among other things, the implications of a system that measured only the positive outcomes but ignored negative results, such as waste or pollution.⁸⁷ However, it also became clear that member governments were more interested in short-term policy recommendations than in big conceptual studies. In April 1970, the majority of committee members pushed for an agenda that focused on tangible results, such as cost–benefit analyses of different policy options or the recommendation of uniform standards to prevent trade distortions, directly applicable by national governments.⁸⁸ On that basis, in July 1970, the OECD Council formally established the Environment Committee. It held its inaugural meeting in November, headed by its first chairman, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Environmental and Population Affairs, Christian Herter. A supporting Environment Directorate in the Secretariat was established in early 1971, receiving nineteen staff from other parts of the Secretariat, fifteen newly hired staff, and a modest budget of FFr 4.4 million.⁸⁹ The British FCO welcomed the choice of chairman, hoping that this would ‘ensure United States support for the OECD’s environmental work and perhaps distract their attention from the NATO CCMS’.⁹⁰

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴TNA, FCO 55/423, UK Mission to Arculus, Science and Technology Dept, FCO, 20 Oct 1970.

⁸⁵FCO 55/424, D. J. Johnson, UK Mission ECE, to Wheeler, Science and Technology Dept, FCO, 24 November 1970.

⁸⁶TNA, FCO 55/423, Arculus, Science and Technology Dept, FCO, to A. H. Cottrell, F.R.S., Cabinet Office, 6 October 1970.

⁸⁷Borowy, ‘Negotiating the environment’.

⁸⁸OECD, ENV(70)11, Ad Hoc Preparatory Committee on the Activities of the OECD Related to Economic Growth, ‘Overall conclusions’, 4 April 1970 (corrected 30 April 1970).

⁸⁹Long, *International environmental issues*, pp. 34–8.

⁹⁰TNA, FCO 55/389, Informal meeting of Preparatory Committee for United Nations Conference, 9 November 1970.

Herter declared that the new committee was ready to cooperate with the ECE, but the establishment of his commission, supported and funded by states which were also ECE members, was a clear victory for the OECD over the ECE. Stanovnik could not help showing his bitterness in a fruitless and somewhat embarrassing attempt to prevent a paragraph committing the ECE to avoid duplication with environmental programmes of other international organizations, agreed in preparation for the Prague Conference, from being inserted into the guidelines for ECE work.⁹¹ Further events added insult to injury. The ECE was not invited to the inaugural meeting of the OECD Environment Committee, and it was only after the protest of several Western countries that the OECD Council issued a special invitation to the ECE to participate actively in all subsequent environmental OECD meetings.⁹² Furthermore, the breadth of the ECE's work faced similar restrictions to those of the OECD, though for different reasons. During preparations for the Prague Conference, the US mission at the ECE complained that, despite the genuine interest in fostering international cooperation with several eastern European countries, Soviet delegates actively worked to limit discussions to pollution control and nature conservation, excluding any social or urban topics.⁹³

Conferences in Prague and Stockholm

As the date of the Prague Conference approached, preparations were overshadowed by the controversy regarding the status of East Germany, as eastern European countries were trying to force the participation of East Germany as a full state, a move that the West German government and other Western governments were similarly determined to prevent. By way of solution, three days before the opening date, the Prague Conference was downgraded from a 'conference' to a 'symposium', and East German delegates attended as guests of the Czech government.⁹⁴

The meeting demonstrated the lopsided character of global development. It was attended by 211 experts from twenty-nine UN/ECE countries, as well as 75 observers from other countries, UN specialized agencies, and other international organizations concerned with environment.⁹⁵ Between them, the countries represented covered 25% of global inhabited land, included 30% of the global population, commanded 90% of global technical resources and knowhow, and produced 80% of global waste. All participants received heavy – non-recyclable – bags filled with numerous reports, and took part in panels addressing environmental problems or policies. Stanovnik used the occasion to declare a 'crisis of environmental conscience ... one of welfare versus production, development versus growth, civilization versus technology'.⁹⁶ Though there was some sparring among participants over which political system was better equipped to deal with environmental challenges, they eventually agreed that meeting the problems would require a transformed approach based on prevention and a new way of measuring (economic) success that could be applied anywhere.⁹⁷

After six days of papers and discussions, participants agreed on a list of 'general and tentative conclusions', including the need for 'a comprehensive, integrated approach to environmental management', the need for consider the environmental consequences before making any decision regarding economic investments or production, and, further, the need

⁹¹TNA, FCO 55/424, Johnson, UK Mission, to Wheeler, 8 December 1970.

⁹²UNOGA, GX34/7J.2, Alexandrov to Bishop, 19 August 1971.

⁹³US mission ECE to US State Department, 4 December 1970, FRUS 1969–76, vol. E-1, doc. 304, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve01/d304> (consulted 19 December 2017).

⁹⁴Hamblin, 'Environmentalism', p. 63.

⁹⁵'UN/ECE symposium on problems relating to environment', *ECE News*, 9, 7/8, July/August 1971, p. 2.

⁹⁶David Leff, 'A meeting in Prague', *Environment*, 13, 9, 1971, pp. 29–33.

⁹⁷UNOG, G 34/1, J.8, Robert Stein, 'The ECE symposium on problems relating to the environment', annex to Stein to Bishop, 4 August 1971.

for promoting experimental projects in pursuance of the idea of ‘zero-discharge’ factories and environmentally sound human settlements; ... the need to further legislation regarding to which anyone causing serious damage to the environment and the natural balance of the countryside – as a result of economic and other activities – would be obliged (to a reasonable extent) either to restore the original features of the areas or to give it new environmentally satisfactory features; ... the need to recycle and reuse material resources; ... to coordinate transboundary challenges, such as river basins or air sheds, discourage soil degradation, and to take into account the effects of industries on rural life, agriculture and biodiversity.⁹⁸

This language seems radical and remarkably prescient. An obligation to restore degraded countryside would only enter international regulations in a much weaker and non-committing format as the polluter-pays principle a year later. Calls for integrated considerations of the environmental repercussions of any economic decision anticipated the core principle of sustainable development some years later. Aiming for ‘zero-discharge’ factories seems more ambitious than any other major international organization or event at the time (or since). Thus, it is remarkable to what extent the event has been forgotten. As a rare comment, one historian suggested that it produced no ‘earthshaking substantive results’ and might have been more important for generating preparatory national reports than for any specific outcome.⁹⁹

This interpretation may be true in the sense that the Prague Conference – as well as the efforts of the other organizations located in Europe and North America – was overtaken by events. With a mixture of enthusiasm and tenacity, the new Secretary-General of the upcoming Stockholm Conference, Maurice Strong, overcame widespread distrust, especially among Southern countries. His important initiatives included an invitation for a group of prominent development experts to a meeting at the Swiss resort of Founex. The meeting did not actually produce unanimity, but two participants, the Sri Lankan Deshamanaya Gamani Corea, future Secretary-General of UNCTAD, and his Pakistani colleague, Mahbub ul Haq, who would formulate the UN Human Development Report in 1990, subsequently authored a ‘Founex report’. Its highlighting of the interconnections between development and environment was sufficient to convince a critical number of Southern governments that environmental concerns would not overwhelm their development demands. Strong also personally met with many sceptical heads of governments and commissioned a book-length report on the state of global environmental challenges and their historical background. It was written by the British development economist Barbara Ward and the French-born American biologist René Dubos with the active input of 152 international experts in fifty-eight countries, published as *Only one earth*.¹⁰⁰

Overall, winning the hearts and minds of a critical mass of policy-makers to endorse the Stockholm Conference as a serious event was a long and gradual process, and it involved not only sceptics from the Southern countries. By late 1970, at the latest, the US State Department began shifting its allegiance between conferences and agencies, favouring the UN as a whole as the central coordinating agency rather than the ECE.¹⁰¹ By late 1971, it was clear that the UN would host the principal event, and, increasingly, negotiating for a position of influence within the international environmental scene meant manoeuvring for a position at Stockholm.

The various organizations chose different ways to arrange themselves with the upcoming Stockholm Conference. The OECD opted for the strategy of putting a lot of work into early-stage studies with the aim of making a constructive contribution that would establish its specific expertise in the field. In May 1972, the OECD Council issued *Guiding principles concerning the*

⁹⁸UN/ECE symposium’, p. 4.

⁹⁹Grievos, ‘Regional efforts’, p. 324.

¹⁰⁰Ivanova, ‘Designing’, p. 343; Manulak, ‘Developing’; Barbara Ward and René Dubois, *Only one earth*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1972.

¹⁰¹Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin (henceforth PAAA), B35/333, ‘Report by Task Force III of the Committee on International Environmental Affairs’, December 1970, available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve01/d303> (consulted 19 December 2017).

international economic aspects of environmental policies, which it recommended for member countries to observe. As a central tenet this document explained that environmental resources were limited and that a policy based on a polluter assuming the costs of pollution was necessary to bring about rational use of scarce environmental resources, to reduce pollution and to avoid international trade distortions.¹⁰² The idea seemed plausible, though prior discussions within the Environment Committee had shown that implementation would be anything but easy and that without a rigorous enforcement infrastructure it was little more than a meaningless phrase.¹⁰³ But the declaration was sufficiently vague to be acceptable to all OECD members and sufficiently strong to present the OECD as a reference agency for economic aspects of environmental concerns. This method could draw on the OECD's uncontested expertise as an economic organization.

A similar strategy was less open to NATO, whose military identity was not easily compatible with seemingly apolitical, technical contributions. Indeed, activities emanating from NATO were far less constructive, though carried out by much the same countries. Initially, the US delegate generated tension by efforts to persuade his colleagues that the CCMS should appear as a single entity, possibly in observer status. The European allies refused, arguing that this would unnecessarily politicize the Stockholm Conference and encourage the Warsaw Pact to bring in their own representation. Instead, several European governments established an informal consulting body, designed to coordinate their views in order to speak with a unified voice at Stockholm. Negotiated with the State Department rather than the White House, this exclusive 'Brussels Group' consisted of representatives of the United States, Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and West Germany. As a major point, they tried to prevent (or at least limit) the establishment of a new fund to finance international environmental work.¹⁰⁴

The strategy chosen by the ECE turned out to be no more successful, as Stanovnik tried to act as political problem solver for the German question. Several Communist countries insisted that East Germany be invited on equal terms with West Germany, which the latter, supported by the US government, vehemently opposed. Lengthy negotiations during preparatory meetings of the ECE, headed by Stanovnik, produced no solution, and the conference remained without Soviet Bloc participation.¹⁰⁵ This episode may have called into question the central strength of the ECE and weakened Stanovnik personally. However, it also demonstrated the significance of the Prague meeting, which did include the Eastern countries. Thus, Prague and Stockholm can be seen as complementary events: only in combination did these environmental conference negotiations reach the First, Second, and Third Worlds.

The shift towards UNEP

As early as June 1970, when discussing the issue with their Italian colleagues, British diplomats considered it unlikely that the OECD could become 'the clearing house for international environmental work across the board' since it could not 'dictate to E.C.E' or 'reflect the views of the developing countries'.¹⁰⁶ There was agreement that the OECD could be used to coordinate views within the Western world but this could not be a substitute for a global coordinating machinery. In this context, the British preferred a General Assembly committee to a new specialized agency.¹⁰⁷ By May 1972 discussions about some form of central environmental agency

¹⁰²OECD, C(72)128, 'Recommendation of the Council on guiding principles concerning international economic aspects of environmental policies', 26 May 1972, available at <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0102> (consulted 3 August 2015).

¹⁰³Borowy, 'Negotiating the environment', pp. 327–33.

¹⁰⁴Hamblin, 'Environmentalism', pp. 64–7.

¹⁰⁵See correspondence in the United Nations Archives, New York, S-0971-0004-12, especially Stanovnik to Secretary-General, 7 March 1972.

¹⁰⁶TNA, FCO 55/383, Thomas to Wheeler, 2 June 1970.

¹⁰⁷TNA, FCO 55/384, Arculus, FCO, to Davis, 6 July 1970.

were in full swing, with several schemes having been proposed. Even within the 'Brussels Group' there were different views of whether the body should be an commission of the Economic and Social Council or an environmental programme answering to the General Assembly, but it was taken for granted that this new entity would belong to the UN.¹⁰⁸ All agreed with the British delegate that recent environmental work by the various institutions had been disillusioning, ineffective, and overly time-consuming. The alternative was no strong central organization. Rather, the general feeling appeared to favour a shift back towards work on the national level.¹⁰⁹

Though these discussions were not the only background to the creation of UNEP (others included the lukewarm support by most developing countries and the resentful attitude of other UN agencies), they formed part of the circumstances that determined the specific shape that UNEP was given: a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly endowed explicitly with a 'small' secretariat and a coordinating, non-operational mandate. However, UNEP had systemic weaknesses that contributed to its isolated position and limited its authority and effectiveness, while its format as a programme also encouraged the continuation of work in existing organizations.¹¹⁰ Thus, all three organizations (the OECD, NATO, and the ECE) retained an environmental sector, albeit to differing degrees. The OECD as an organization of the most industrialized countries, which most burdened the environment, arguably had 'a unique potential for world-wide, as well as European, effectiveness, even though it [was] as yet primarily a coordinating and information body'.¹¹¹ This did not markedly distinguish it from the other organizations, all of which relied on recommendations and persuasion. In fact, their strengths and weaknesses reflected the nature of political support rather than systemic differences. While the OECD could tap into impressive governmental information resources, NATO (possibly because of strong financial and political backing) appeared to elicit comparatively prompt national responses, and the ECE provided a unique communication forum across East–West lines, albeit at the price of further lowering the usually already minimal lowest common denominator.

The CCMS continued its specific combination of pilot studies and fellowships, which automatically limited the extent of its engagement to what individual countries were willing to finance and administer. The end of the Nixon administration also led to a decline of US support for the scheme. Nevertheless, the CCMS survived until 2006, when it merged with the NATO Science Committee to form a new Science for Peace and Security Committee.¹¹² The ECE also retained its environmental programme, though in a limited way, and with the end of the Cold War it changed its character from one that worked across East–West lines to a Pan-European agency, many of whose members had economies in transition. In 1994, the Group of Senior Environmental Advisers was transformed into the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy. In part, its activities complemented those of the OECD, for instance taking up the OECD instrument of environmental performance reviews and applying them to ECE countries that were not members of the OECD.¹¹³

Meanwhile, the environmental programme of the OECD grew into a formidable part of the agency's work. The economic focus remained a significant component and, as a result, the OECD played an important role in the invention of the concepts of sustainable development and, some decades later, green growth.¹¹⁴ It also engaged in a growing range of other topics, such as

¹⁰⁸PAAA, B35/421, 'Vermerk: UN-Umweltkonferenz in Stockholm', 9 May 1972.

¹⁰⁹PAAA, B35/421, 'Bericht über die 2. Sitzung der Brüsseler Gruppe über Umweltfragen am 28. September 1971', 6 October 1971.

¹¹⁰Ivanova, 'Designing', pp. 347–9; Nico Schrijver, *Development without destruction*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010, pp. 114–18.

¹¹¹Angelo, 'Protection', p. 515.

¹¹²Hamblin, 'Environmentalism', p. 70.

¹¹³UNECE, 'About the Committee on Environmental Policy', <http://www.unece.org/environmental-policy/committee-on-environmental-policy/about-the-committee-on-environmental-policy.html> (consulted 6 December 2017).

¹¹⁴Borowy, '(Re-)thinking', pp. 222–39.

chemical standardization, agriculture, and hazardous substances.¹¹⁵ In addition to the Convention on Transboundary Air Pollution, it provided substantial behind-the-scenes work towards other important international agreements, such as the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal.¹¹⁶ Although UNEP also embarked on related projects, its position was not strong and some decades later it was considered to be a programme that had ‘not been tremendously successful’.¹¹⁷

Conclusions

For some years, the environment was tantamount to a wild card, available and applicable in flexible ways. This option only existed for a short time, and it reflected a rare combination of the emergence of a new high-profile issue of broadly recognized concern and the absence of an international agency holding central responsibility. Like uncharted territory, this field attracted potential occupiers, eager to broaden their international prestige. But institutional efforts to stake out the field for themselves also reflected the desire of some diplomats to employ the environment as an instrument of foreign policy or to shape economic–environmental debates according to their understandings of what was required for a sustainable future – years before the expression had entered the public discourse. By 1972 these efforts had been eclipsed by the Stockholm Conference and the subsequent establishment of UNEP. There are reasons for and consequences of this outcome.

Considering the conferences of Prague and Stockholm, tied to the ECE and UNEP respectively, it is tempting to see these events in part as a competition between Maurice Strong and Janez Stanovnik. The two men shared similar views regarding the challenges of reconciling environmental and economic exigencies, and both had similarly dynamic and enthusiastic personalities, which they used in support of the institution they headed or were planning to establish. Of the two, Strong could mobilize far superior resources for a preparatory process, involving meetings and publications of high-level experts. These circumstances were significant, since his involvement may have been the decisive factor in making the Stockholm Conference come about. But the underlying question was much bigger than two people or available funding. With close to all countries of the world being sovereign states and members of the UN, it was no longer possible, as in the 1960s, to work or speak on an issue of global relevance while ignoring two-thirds of the global population. Regardless of negotiations and manoeuvrings before 1972, at some point, probably sooner rather than later, individual countries of the Global South (possibly those that took an important role at the time, like Brazil or India, or those claiming leadership later, such as China) or groups of countries (such as the G-77) would have raised effective protest against practices whereby the industrial countries decided global environmental issues between themselves.

Nevertheless, the efforts of the ECE, the OECD, and NATO were not without relevance. First, they represented an option for a slightly different development. Though it would not have prevented the eventual involvement of Southern countries, a total or even partial cancellation of the Stockholm Conference would probably have prolonged the period when the ECE and the OECD and, to a lesser degree, NATO played a leading role in international environmentalism. It might also have lengthened their competition for pre-eminence. With the Nixon administration supporting NATO, the British government favouring the OECD, and the ECE being the only agency including eastern European members, none commanded uncontested political support. The ECE and the OECD, being economic agencies, would have needed to address the central question of how to safeguard economic results without destroying the physical basis of economic (and other)

¹¹⁵Long, *International environmental issues*, pp. 33–80.

¹¹⁶Sejal Choksi, ‘The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal’, *Ecology Law Quarterly*, 28, 2001, pp. 509–39, available at <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/elq/vol28/iss2/13> (consulted 15 January 2018).

¹¹⁷Ivanova, ‘Designing’, p. 339.

prosperity. In the absence of the Stockholm Conference and subsequently UNEP, they would have continued to have leading voices in the international environmental discourse.

Pushed by Van Lennep at the OECD and Stanovnik at the ECE, both organizations became involved in critical discussions of growth-centred and environmentally destructive forms of economies. Thus, though they should not be romanticized as agencies on the brink of revolutionizing global economics, the language used in OECD and ECE documents reads as a far more determined critique of ongoing economic activities than do those emanating from Stockholm a year later, which took great pains to avoid any restrictions on economic activity that could stand in the way of Southern development. Thus, if the ECE, the OECD, and, to a lesser degree, NATO had continued to act as organizations of broad environmental authority, comparatively radical goals such as zero-emission production or a polluter-pays principle with teeth might have gained more prominence. This might even have allowed more discussion of the theses of the *Limits to growth* study, which had ties to the OECD but was vehemently opposed by many actors, including and especially low-income countries of the Global South. As it was, these approaches were weakened or quickly forgotten. Thus, a delayed extension of international environmentalism to a global scale might have provided a different discursive and conceptual context.

While this interpretation involves some informed speculation, there is firmer ground for arguing that international environmental work of the early 1970s benefited from the temporary competition between the ECE, the OECD, and NATO. These organizations upgraded the environment in their work programme in ways that were not quickly reversible. In addition, this rivalry gave rise to a series of initiatives and studies about environmental topics which might not otherwise have happened to the same extent or at all. The country reports prepared in preparation for the 1971 Prague Conference, the pilot reports by NATO, and the more far-reaching OECD studies on possible forms of reconciliation of environment and economy all formed part of efforts to heighten the profile of the respective organizations. However, the inter-organizational rivalry may also have weakened international environmental work, unnecessarily politicizing it or making it appear as the pet projects of bickering agencies. Besides, the perceived strong presence of environmental topics in existing organizations was a major reason behind the subsidiary status of UNEP and the tendency to see it as a 'weak programme', arguably a factor in its perceived lack of success. In the long run, it is questionable whether a strong central agency or the continuation of several smaller organizations, all contributing to environmental knowledge and policies, would have been more effective.

A decade later, Maurice Strong and Janez Stanovnik would meet again as colleagues in the Brundtland Commission. Both were active and forward-driving members of the Commission, whose report and recommendations made 'sustainable development' a globally recognized concept. Both the interests and the needs of countries of the Global South and the need to fully integrate environmental considerations into all economic decisions formed essential parts of this idea. All debates of the early 1970s, whether or not they were immediately visible, contributed to the long-term evolution of global economic–environmental thinking.

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