

THE STOCKHOLM CONFERENCE AT 50

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Held in Stockholm from 6-15 June 1972, the UN Conference on the Human Environment had such a remarkable influence that it is identified with the birth of global environmentalism.¹ Institutionally, its most important result was the birth of the United Nations Environment Program, UNEP. However, its impact clearly surpassed the actual institutional developments. With and after Stockholm, the United Nations adopted the environmental cause and served as the engine and network of environmentalism. At the conference, wide-ranging and interconnected issues such as trade, poverty, environmental protection and development were discussed together in an integrated way.

The Stockholm Conference signalled an authentic change in mindset. It was both the product and, in turn, the trigger of new attention to the environment. It intended to work on long-range vision and strategic planning more than seeking short-term solutions to immediate problems. The conference's goal was to produce a report on environmental conditions, a declaration on the human environment, and an Action Plan. It was accompanied by efforts to target public opinion, focusing on producing materials for the youth in the form of exhibitions, radio and TV. It also recognized the need for a robust scientific foundation of global environmental policy-making, serving as an arena where the political and science communities could meet and trigger policy responses. Consequently, one of UNEP's key mandates was monitoring, tracking, and recording environmental data.

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¹ Literature placing the Stockholm Conference at the core of modern environmentalism is wide. Fundamental readings are: MCCORMICK (1989); MACEKURA (2015); MCNEILL (2010: 263-278). See also: SCHULZ-WALDEN (2013); RADKAU (2011); ENGELS (2010: 119-131); EGELSTON (2022: 15-30); JOOS (2023); TOLBA and EL-KHOLY (1992).

The Stockholm conference broadened the environmentalists' agenda beyond conservation and pollution to include population and poverty, while radioactive contaminants and man-made global warming, although debated in other publications for the conference, such as the "Only one Earth" report, were left out. Developing countries saw environmentalism as a distraction from poverty, the real plague of the developing world. Demography and pollution were problems of the rich countries in the West, whereas the real issues in the South were war, the arms trade, and colonialism, their leaders argued. The burden of creating ecologically viable solutions was not to fall on developing countries, which needed compensation and additional resources to cope with ecological policies.

Along the path toward sustainability initiated in Stockholm, governments negotiated treaties, adopted action plans and programmes, collected environmental data, created scientific bodies, convened global conferences, and established environment ministries. The Conference inaugurated a new era of multilateral environmental cooperation and treaty-making, with ensuing mega-conferences – including the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit – that produced, in turn, numerous multilateral environmental agreements.²

Significant studies have analysed the impact of the conference, the biography of its protagonists, and the weight on national strategies. Several works have focussed on the role of international organisations in bridging the Cold War divide, stressing how the Conference, initially intended to deal with global issues in a climate of détente, ended up amplifying both East-West and North-South tensions. Others have been linking the environmental conundrums in reasonings about technology, the history of science and the role of scientists in politics. Other studies have focussed instead on the part of social movements in pressing for a marked ecological action – and on the role of vested interests in resisting such action.³ The anniversary is, of course, producing more as a consequence of the many events set up to celebrate the Conference and relaunch its spirit, starting with the Stockholm+50 conference sponsored by UNEP and held on June 2-3, 2022.⁴ This special issue is partly a result of the wave of celebrations,

² SEYFANG (2003).

³ On international organisations: KAISER and MEYER (2016); SELCER (2018); WADE (2004). On the Cold War dynamics: HÜNEMÖRDER (2010); KIRCHHOF and MCNEILL (2019); LORENZINI (2019); BOROWY (2013).

⁴ <https://www.stockholm50.global/>; The IIED, Legacies of Stockholm, <https://www.iisd.org/articles/deep-dive/stockholm-conference-legacy>; SPHERE project <https://www.kth.se/philhist/historia/forskning/environmental-humanis/sphere/study-of-the-planetary-human-environment-relationship-sphere-the-rise-of-global-environmental-governance-1.872762>.

too. It collects a selection of the papers presented at the webinar *Stockholm 72 and the Rise of Global Environmental Governance*, held on June 6, 2022, and organised by the RUCHE (Réseau Universitaire de Chercheurs en Histoire Environnementale, France), the Environmental Humanities Lab at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm (SPHERE project) and the Luigi Einaudi Foundation.

Two papers in this issue follow intellectual journeys and cultural trajectories: Jacopo Bonasera deals with Neo-Malthusian intellectuals (Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin) and their stress on the environmental relation between population and resources; Sara Lorenzini sheds light on the iconic figure of the British economist Barbara Ward and her efforts to gather a network of development economists and politicians who would establish the embryonic notion of sustainable development as a genuine concern for international politics. Other essays highlight the role of international organisations as the place where the environment is dealt with. They focus on the tension between the growth imperative and the ecological threat in the long wave of Stockholm, with visionaries, pacifists and doomers uneasy bedfellows against the champions of capitalist growth imperatives. Federico Paolini explores the fascinating and understudied connection between labour and the environment by focusing on the debates in the ILO Governing Body and the International Labour Conference in view of the Stockholm Conference. Luigi Piccioni analyses the troubled Catholic path towards ecological awareness and the issue of the Church's late confrontation with environmentalism. The perspective adopted here concerns a minor (and forgotten) episode of the post-Vatican II era and the pontificate of Paul VI, that is, the establishment of the 'Sorge Commission' created to prepare the participation of the Holy See in the Stockholm Conference. The Catholic commodity trading expert Giorgio Nebbia, and the Jesuit priest and scholar Bartolomeo Sorge were crucial in promoting the first statement of the Church on the ecological problem. Finally, Gianluca Borzoni provides a historical-diplomatic perspective on the environmental interests of the Nixon Administration on the path leading to the Stockholm Conference.

All articles collected here tell the story of a 'Stockholm moment', an age of worldwide enthusiasm born out of a sense of both urgency and hope for a radical change in the international system. A change that was inspired by a faith in science and grand visions for the future – which sometimes appeared to be scary but most of the times were still mildly optimistic. Fifty years later, it is appalling to hear how we still struggle with similar considerations, albeit now more alarming, with the care for the environment sadly too often submerged by the short-sighted logic of profit.

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