

BARBARA WARD AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER
OF THE STOCKHOLM CONFERENCE
AT THE BIRTH OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Barbara Ward was fundamental in promoting an articulated reflection on how to balance economic growth and care for the environment. The article explores how her speeches and writings influenced the standing of policymakers and civil society groups at the Stockholm Conference and after. It discusses how Ward made her mission out of communicating the urgency of the environmental crisis worldwide and how she fought for her idea that promoting the environment had to go together with a fight for social justice and redistribution. From within the Pontifical Commission “Justice and Peace”, she argued that environmental protection was a moral duty and, as such, belonged to the agenda of the Catholic Church. Acting on many fronts, from civil society to the community of experts, to the decision-making elites, through formal and informal networks, she achieved a consensus on establishing sustainable development as a fundamental concern for international politics.

Keywords: Barbara Ward, Stockholm Conference, Environment, Sustainable development.

“Nearly everything which works today began with an idea and a small group of people committed to its realisation... Our visionary perspective is the true realism and that is what we must pursue”¹

(Barbara Ward)

The UN Conference on the Human Environment, held from 6-15 June 1972 in Stockholm, is celebrated as a turning point. It called for a new era of

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¹ Barbara Ward, speaking to the North-South Roundtable, December 1980. Quoted in JOLLY 2007: 47.

international cooperation on environmental issues, incorporating ecological concerns into development strategies, thus setting the stage for sustainable development.² Institutionally, its most remarkable result was the birth of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Conference had a multiplier effect, making the environment the unmissable guest of successive international gatherings, such as the World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974, the World Food Conference in Rome in 1974, and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver in 1976. At Stockholm, the nascent environmental movement found a new icon: the British economist Barbara Ward, the President of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), who catalysed the attention of the audience, and of the world, on the need to think out of the box and find ways to prioritise global well-being more fully, putting the health of Planet Earth at the centre.

This article is about Barbara Ward and her reasoning around the tension between environment and development that earned her the leadership of what some call “the environment development movement”.³ Together with Secretary-General Maurice Strong, Ward was fundamental in setting up the Stockholm Conference, in inspiring and guiding it. She was, in turn, transformed by Stockholm, becoming increasingly critical of what she defined as “overconsumptive types of development”.⁴ Ward was also fundamental in gathering a network of like-minded development economists and politicians who, together with her, established the embryonic notion of sustainable development as a genuine concern for international politics. Through the case of Ward and her colleagues, this article also offers evidence of the limits encountered by international networks of experts in orienting global agendas.

1. BARBARA WARD AS A DEVELOPMENT THINKER BEFORE STOCKHOLM⁵

In the late 1960s, when preparations for the UN Conference on the Human Environment began, Barbara Ward was the holder of the Albert

² Sustainable development is now a ubiquitous expression. Its official birth date is generally placed in 1987, with the final report produced by the Brundtland Commission *Our Common Future* that defined it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. On the works of the Brundtland Commission, BOROWY 2013.

³ STRONG 2003: 26.

⁴ “The Cocoyoc Declaration”: 897.

⁵ For a biography of Barbara Ward: GARTLAN 2010 and SATTERTHWAITTE 2006.

Schweitzer Chair at Columbia University. As the Professor of International Economic Development there, she organised salient events to discuss a renewal in strategies for global development at the end of the First Development Decade (1960-1970). Ward, who started her career in 1939 as a journalist, had engaged since the 1940s with economic development, that is, with state-led strategies to promote growth and defeat poverty. At the time, she wrote on the construction of the welfare state in post-war Britain and on the political economy of Southern Europe. Ward considered the Marshall Plan the ideal policy to achieve growth and well-being worldwide. In the columns of *The Economist*, she argued time and again that Europeans needed to care for the poor, indicating that they should set up “a second Marshall Plan” to help needy people out of misery. William Clark, her successor at IIED, recalls her words on the eve of the Commonwealth-sponsored Colombo Conference in 1950: “We in Europe are the fortunate minority. We dare not forget the really poor ... because prosperity, like peace, is indivisible”.⁶ Such concepts would be the pillars of Ward’s global thinking.

After the war, Ward spent almost two decades – the 1950s and 1960s – outside Europe. She moved to Ghana and became an early promoter of development with her husband, Robert G.A. Jackson, Kwame Nkrumah’s closest advisor on the Volta River Project and appointed chairman of independent Ghana’s Commission for Development. Ward was close to Nkrumah, who often discussed his plans with her. She then moved to the US, where she became a counsellor to numerous American personalities because of her expertise in Africa and India. Ward was a consultant to President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and a friend and de facto ghost-writer to his successor Lyndon Johnson. A confidant to the US ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, and the World Bank President Robert McNamara, she has often been identified with US global policies, even though she emphasised her European identity.

As an economist, journalist, prolific writer and public speaker, Barbara Ward was always concerned about ways to promote “a prosperous world order” and prevent another world economic crisis from taking place. She insisted that the West, and especially Britain and Europe, was to take responsibility and “establish a new relationship between the wealthy nations of the world and their straitened brethren”.⁷ In 1959, disillusioned by the weakness of the UN in setting up structures to promote economic development, she hoped that the OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-

⁶ Quoted in SATTERTHWAIT 2006: 56.

⁷ WARD 1954: 229.

operation and Development) could be more influential in promoting growth which, throughout the high modernist period of the 1960s, she considered as a perfect equivalent to economic development.⁸ In her 1964 book *Towards a World of Plenty?* she described “the question of the relations between the developed and the underdeveloped world” as “one of the greatest issues of our time”: The western world had to deal with the fate of the “external proletariat in Asia, Africa and in large part Latin America” and to “provide aid and help the poor”.⁹ In 1965, she praised the UN decade of development as “one of the more interesting, most encouraging, most forgotten, and most misunderstood” policies, inspired by the task of bringing together developed and underdeveloped.¹⁰ In the second half of the 1960s, Ward became increasingly concerned with the redistribution of wealth, with the great unbalance separating the rich white few from the rest.¹¹ As far as she was concerned, development and international redistribution of wealth were ineluctable moral issues.¹²

With her activism for the cause of development, her activity as a consultant to many leading personalities in the United States, her work as an academic in prestigious institutions (Harvard and Columbia University), and her familiarity with Third World leaders, at the end of the 1960s Barbara Ward was seen as the person who could conjure up ways to bond the developed and the developing world together. When asked by Maurice Strong to help out with the UN Conference on the Human Environment, she had just finished organising a memorable meeting of development economists belonging to different generations who engaged with the 1968 Pearson Report and the ideas on how the international system, and especially the UN and its agencies, should streamline their commitment to aiding developing countries in the Second Development Decade of the 1970s. These results were published in 1971 under the iconic title *The Widening Gap: Development in the 1970s*, and called for a tremendous effort against poverty, focusing on redistributing wealth internationally.¹³

⁸ WARD 1959; For a general history of development ideas and policies, see LORENZINI 2019 and UNGER 2018.

⁹ WARD 1964: 45-46.

¹⁰ WARD 1965, Columbia University, 2 April 1964, Lectures in Memory of Dag Hammarskjöld.

¹¹ WARD 1966: 80-87.

¹² WARD 1970, from the Introduction by Father Gremeillon.

¹³ WARD 1971.

2. PREPARING FOR STOCKHOLM

When she started working for the Conference on the Human Environment, Barbara Ward was no expert in environmental issues. However, she was “aware of the developing countries’ concerns and very much shared them”, commented her sparring partner, Maurice Strong.¹⁴ Changing the understanding of the environmental problem and making it more popular in the Third World became the task she was assigned. The dilemma was getting the developing countries willing to discuss an issue – pollution – which they felt was a responsibility and an exclusive concern of the rich countries. It was about presenting the environment in a way relevant to developing countries.¹⁵ With her extraordinary talent for networking and mobilising people and resources, Ward was crucial in setting up the conference in ways Third World countries could relate to. In a short time, she produced the two most vital documents shared at Stockholm: the 1971 Report of the Founex conference dealing with the tensions between development and environment and the 1972 book *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*.

At Founex, Switzerland, in June 1971, Ward summoned a fantastic group of leading experts from all over the world – mainly (but not only) development economists – to reflect on how to promote economic development while caring for the protection of the environment. Most notably among them were Mahbub ul Haq (Pakistan), Gamani Corea (Sri Lanka), Enrique Iglesias (Uruguay), Rodrigo Botero (Colombia), Ignacy Sachs (Poland), and the more UN system insiders Hans Singer and Jan Tinbergen.¹⁶ The prevailing feeling on the eve of the meeting was that if the environment became the overriding priority in international politics, it could prove catastrophic for developing countries. However, during sessions that have been described as creative interchange, it became clear that developing countries could avoid the risks of being trapped in no-growth strategies and turn the new situation to their advantage. For example, they could claim compensation or extra aid. The meeting formalised the environment’s critical importance to the success of development plans. Experts discussed the consequences of big development projects in the recent past.¹⁷ It was evident that big projects – the Aswan dam was a much-cited

¹⁴ STRONG 2003: 20.

¹⁵ GARTLAN 2010: 162.

¹⁶ STRONG 2003: 21.

¹⁷ *Development and Environment: Report and Working Papers of a Panel of Experts Convened by the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment: (Founex, Swit-*

case – had tremendous adverse effects on the ecology of developing countries and that these effects had been underestimated and had aggravated social unrest.¹⁸ The report, written by ul Haq and Corea, was then shared worldwide and discussed at several regional gatherings before being adopted as a fundamental background document for the final conference.¹⁹ It left to every single country the definition of the minimum environmental standards compatible with its stage of development and its cultural and social development goals. But, importantly, it recognised that developed countries responsible for the ecological damage had an obligation to bear the costs of dealing with them.

Barbara Ward was also responsible for drawing up a strategy to involve public opinion, starting with authoring (and popularising in the press) *Only One Earth*, a book that circulated as a blueprint for the whole Stockholm Conference. Ward had started research for it from scratch with her assistant David Runnalls. *Only One Earth* was a joint outcome of her collaboration with biologist René Dubos. An early draft and a questionnaire had been circulated widely within a selected qualified readership, with the idea of collecting the opinions of intellectuals and scientists about the ecosystem; humanity's place in the natural environment; and the role of technology, including atomic energy. The book starts with a birds-eye historical overview, from prehistory until the present, following “the powerful trinity of forces in human evolution: science, the market, the nation”.²⁰ After dealing with the most urgent problems raised by the environmental issue (high demand for resources, consumer pressure, resource use, the increasing concentration of people living in heavily built-up areas), it dwelled on pollution, the abuse of land and international waters, the puzzle with resources in agriculture and industry, population, and the green revolution. The conclusions anticipated the importance of the atmosphere, global climate and climate change. The book ended by acknowledging “the global interdependence of man's airs and climates is such that local decisions are simply inadequate”, claiming that the world needed a deeper and more widely shared knowledge of its environmental unity, a new sense of partnership and sharing, and more importantly of all to avoid “the final folly of war”.²¹ *Only One Earth* was distributed to the delegations and, more broadly, to public opinion.

zerland, June 4-12, 1971), *Paris and The Hague; Mouton, 1972*. Environmental Science and Public Policy Archives, Harvard College Library (hereafter ESPPA), Strong Papers, Box 40.

¹⁸ *Working Paper 4: Environmental Costs and Priorities*, ESPPA, Strong Papers, Box 40.

¹⁹ UN Doc. A/CONF.48/10 Annex I at 20, 33, 1971.

²⁰ WARD and DUBOS 1972.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 270, 290, 297.

3. AT THE STOCKHOLM CONFERENCE

Barbara Ward participated in the Stockholm Conference as the Senior Adviser to Secretary-General Maurice Strong. She was a superb communicator and public speaker, and she provided an emotional and applauded opening address in the distinguished lecture series associated with the conference. “In a stirring impromptu speech that had bored delegates rushing back to fill a previously half-empty conference hall”, Ward reminded the audience of the necessity to actively promote environmental protection without giving up on growth.²² Stockholm, she proclaimed, was a turning point in history. “We are in one of these times of vertigo”, she said, of incredible excitement, when “people are radically beginning to reconsider how they have to view their life on Earth”. It was a time that reminded her of the Copernican Revolution, she claimed with vigour. “We cannot cheat by simply saying that we can carry on like this – that two-thirds of the population have to stay poor so that one-third can get richer”, she insisted, “we have got to have a radical revision of our concept of how we run a world society which is hopelessly lopsided”.²³ In her speech, commented many, Ward made it clear that if the world was at this point, it was because of the rich countries, not the poor. And that it was the developed countries’ responsibility to redress the situation. Father Henri de Riedmatten, the head of the Vatican delegation, expanded on Ward’s call for a new morality: humanity’s great ethical systems, he repeated, in India, China, and the Middle East, agreed on the point that we live thanks to moderation, compassion, and justice and die instead because of violence, pride, and insatiable greed.²⁴

In Stockholm, Barbara Ward took part in multiple NGOs sponsored discussions. She wrote the final statement for the Environmental Forum, insisting on involving civil society, activists, and the youth movements.²⁵ The great importance of Stockholm, she believed, was evident from the astounding number of people who got there at their expense to contribute

²² *Environment is Politics Forum*, in “Historical Archives of the European Union” (hereafter HAEU), 142 GR.

²³ The quotes are from the recording held in the British Library Recording Archives, WARD 1972b, “UN Conference on the Human Environment. Barbara Ward, Lady Jackson Lecture”, Rex Keating UNESCO collection. A transcription, deprived of some emphasis, is available in WARD 2003: 3-9.

²⁴ GREMILLION 1973.

²⁵ *Statement of the Non-Governmental Organizations to the Plenary Session to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, distributed as an official document to the commission Iustitia et Pax, in FGGN, b. Iustitia et pax; now published in PICCIONI 2018: Appendix 3.

to saving the planet. “The interests never sleep”, she warned at the end of her distinguished lecture.²⁶ What did she mean? Perhaps, her warning originated from the controversial report on the *Limits to Growth* prepared by Aurelio Peccei’s Club of Rome between 1968 and 1972 and published in February of that year.²⁷ The report was based on computer-aided analysis of complex systems with multiple factors – population, agricultural production, natural resources, industrial production, and pollution. It concluded that the world should abandon the idea of steady economic growth. It was discussed in the parallel conference (the Stockholm Forum). “Development vs Environment – the Limits to Growth” was the provocative title given to the debate on the Club of Rome report, with Herman Daly (USA), the System analysis specialist M. Forero (Colombia), and Josue de Castro (Brazil) as speakers. Perhaps Ward’s warning hinted instead at business interests distorting attention from the moral dimension of environmental protection. There were plans to turn ecological protection into business opportunities for the Global North. For example, ENI’s report on water cleaning technologies was promoted with insistence by the Italian government as a fundamental tool to help the Third World take responsibility for protecting the environment.²⁸

At the conference, several voices rejoindered Barbara Ward’s ideas on promoting environmentalism with a human dimension. The most significant was no doubt Indira Gandhi, who spoke on 14 June. Her wards are remembered because of the memorable assertion added last minute: “Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters?”²⁹ But many passages in her speech revolved around the moral duty to change perspective in dealing with growth and the planet. “The overriding concern with Self and Today is the basic cause of the ecological crisis”, claimed Gandhi. “Pollution is not a technical problem. The fault lies not in science and technology as such but in the sense of values in the contemporary world which ignores the rights of others and is oblivious of the longer perspective”. The inspiring principle of “one humanity” in Indira Gandhi’s words fully reflected Barbara Ward’s approach. Also, the effort to avoid converting ecology into another patent-protected business echoed Ward’s apprehension. “I could not help but remark in reflecting on Stockholm how in this tremendous intergovernmental event dominated by men ...two extraordinary women

²⁶ WARD 1972b.

²⁷ MEADOWS 1972.

²⁸ LORENZINI 2016.

²⁹ “Text of the Address of Shrimati Indira Gandhi Prime Minister of India to the UN Conference on Human Environment”, June 14, 1972, in HAEU, CM2/1972, 0506. See also MATHIESEN 2014.

were the main stars”, recalls Maurice Strong.³⁰ The two women he refers to are precisely Barbara Ward and Indira Gandhi.

There were diverse ideas on how to balance environmental concerns and development.³¹ And divergent ways to come to terms with Barbara Ward’s opening speech adopting a “view from the Global North”. Robert McNamara, close friends with Ward, spoke at the Stockholm conference in his capacity as President of the World Bank. In his speech, he tackled the quality-of-life dilemma. What to prioritise? Growth or a cleaner environment? He explained that the World Bank had already changed its procedures in order to take into account ecological threats. Acting on the principle that prevention was less costly than repairing the damage, it had introduced an ecology counsellor in charge of rejecting the projects implying ecological threats.³² Sicco Mansholt, President of the European Commission, did not subscribe to the centrality of growth. He argued that excessive growth in the Global North exacerbated the political tensions emerging from the skewed distribution of wealth between North and South. “It is no use trying to fight pollution of the seas, the soil and the environment ...unless we take steps to combat the unbridled growth of production and consumption in the rich part of the world [and] the unlimited poverty and misery in the poor part of the world”, he claimed.³³ Mansholt detailed his ideas on central planning for a circular economy in a letter to Franco Maria Malfatti in 1971. The letter, generally described as an exercise in dystopia, recommended forgetting about maximising growth and promoting “clean and recycle” instead. It also suggested introducing anti-pollution taxes and environmental quality certificates to guide consumption. Finally, it advocated organising a proper, integrated division of labour with the Third World with barriers against cheap raw materials and low-environmental-standard products in international trade.³⁴

³⁰ STRONG 2003.

³¹ The whole collection of the opening declarations of the different delegations is available in HAEU, CM2/1972, 0506.

³² “Discours prononcé par Robert S. McNamara devant la Conférence des Nations Unies sur l’Environnement”, in HAEU, Fonds Georges Rencki GR 143, p. 5.

³³ “Intervention de M.L.S. Mansholt, Président de la Commission des Communautés Européennes”, in HAEU, Fonds Georges Rencki GR 143.

³⁴ Letter to Malfatti, in HAEU, Fonds Georges Rencki GR 142.

4. ECOLOGY AS A MORAL DUTY AT THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION JUSTICE AND PEACE

In the immediate aftermath of the Stockholm conference, Ward was active on environmental issues, especially within the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace (*Iustitia et pax*). She regularly corresponded with countless ecumenical community members as a devout Catholic engaged with the social doctrine of the Church. During the 1960s, her ideas and writings had reached the highest echelons and contributed to the official line of the Church, reflected in Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. In 1967 she entered Justice and Peace as the "development specialist", the only woman out of 25 members and external consultants.³⁵ Invited to speak at a Synod of Bishops in 1971, she claimed that the problems of ecology and international justice were inseparable and urged the Church to take the lead in bringing about a more controlled use of resources by fostering a modesty of living.³⁶ Furthermore, she insisted that the Church engage in a public opinion offensive to state the importance of the ecological question as a worldwide issue.³⁷ In her opinion, the Church needed to respond to the accusation that Christianity was excessively anthropocentric and tintured with a unique arrogance toward nature.³⁸

The seventh General Assembly of the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace, held in Rome on 20-26 September 1972, discussed the Pastoral document *Action for International Justice, Development, and Peace*.³⁹ Barbara Ward had written it. In the debate, chaired by Justice and Peace Secretary Joseph Gremillion, all participants agreed that discussing International Justice and Development required tackling the environment.⁴⁰ The Church had an important role to play in this respect. For the last three hundred years, three master ideas dominated secular thought: that science could

³⁵ LAMBERT 1981: 11. On the developmental and environmental turn of the late 1960s and Paul VI's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* and Catholic Social Teaching, see SHADLE 2018: 80-89 and, more broadly, CHENU 1982.

³⁶ *New York Times*, October 21, 1971, quoted in GARTLAN 2010: 170.

³⁷ PICCIONI 2018: 44.

³⁸ WHITE 1967; TURINA 2013.

³⁹ "Report by Barbara Ward, 7th General Assembly of Justice and Peace, Rome 20-26 September 1972", in PICCIONI 2018: 235-245.

⁴⁰ Ward's introduction was followed by the comments of the members of the Vatican delegation to Stockholm De Riedmatten and Giorgio Nebbia and of the American Jesuit father Robert L. Faricy, who had attended as an observer. "La Pontificia Commissione 'Giustizia e Pace' presenta una Conferenza-Dibattito, Lunedì 18 settembre 1972, sulla Conferenza delle Nazioni Unite sull'Ambiente Umano. Risultati. Lavoro susseguente. Implicazioni per la Chiesa", in FGGN, b. *Iustitia et pax*, in PICCIONI 2018: 44.

make nature “work for human purposes”, that material growth was unlimited, and that the nation-state was free to decide without interference how to use natural resources for its national interests. Stockholm, argued Ward, had revealed that these master ideas were unrealistic. It was now clear, she claimed, that resources were not unlimited and that the planet could not carry a sustained rate of population increase. She added that modern economies should not be wasteful and that the billions spent annually on arms could be used for an environmental clean-up. The economy should work on a “sustained yield” basis, featuring the recycling of materials, the conservation of energy, and introducing a making-polluter-pay clause.

The intense criticism against the nation-state and its arrogance resurfaces in many places in Ward’s document submitted to the Pontifical Commission:

The inescapable planetary interdependence sets strict, rational, and unrepeatable limits to our traditional concepts of the nation state. In each category – be it the old arrogance of all-mastering science, the unrestrained greed of a purely materialist economy or the angry self-assertion of national egoism – we are driven, by reality itself, to new attitudes of modesty, thrift, mutual respect and planetary sharing. The moral law cannot be dismissed.

Ward also criticised ideological appropriations of the ecological crisis. Both capitalism and imperialism, she argued, carried the same scientific arrogance, economic greed, carelessness, and national self-assertion. What about population growth? Birth control was, of course, not permissible for the Church. Therefore, Ward insisted on the dynamics of the demographic transition: better living standards, more education, and women’s emancipation “have created conditions in which parents decide to have smaller families”.⁴¹ In an article written at that time and appeared on *L’Osservatore Romano*, Ward contended that it was about constructing a new global order with the awareness that pollution, waste, depletion of resources, economic greed, and national arrogance had led humanity into a crucible. The solution was a Copernican Revolution: supplanting national appetites with a new morality of planetary cooperation, modesty in lifestyles, greater justice, and sharing.⁴²

Barbara Ward’s message for the Roman Curia was powerful. Her speech “Only One Earth: Its Future and the Responsibility of the Church” was published as a pamphlet titled *A New Creation?* Here again, the target

⁴¹ “Statement of the Non-Governmental Organizations to the Plenary Session to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment”, in PICCIONI 2018: 185.

⁴² WARD 1972a.

of criticism is the same: the arrogance of the modern state that needs to be surpassed by justice, solidarity, and world cooperation. "Seven billion people trying, as the 21st-century opens, to secure American living standards for all, would precipitate such an exhaustion of resources and such a toll of pollution that the technological system would simply crack under the strain". Claims of absolute national sovereignty clashed against "the incontrovertible evidence that many issues, of environment, of commerce, of survival itself, simply surpass the effective jurisdiction of even the most powerful state". The modern state, Ward argued, offends good order by claiming too much power from smaller bodies but also in trading environmental control responsibilities which it is too little and too incompetent to fulfil. A world strategy for environmental protection and the rational deployment of resources was badly needed:

Under no conditions can unlimited growth and trickle-down economics postpone the problems of justice and solidarity [...] Under no conditions can we bolster our consumption by simply continuing not to pay for the pollution and waste caused. Under no conditions can a world fully inhabited and carrying 7 to 10 billion people offer still rising standards to a minority and, at best, stagnation to everyone else.⁴³

This document was a highlight in the Catholic engagement with environmental issues. The fervour, however, declined very quickly. Environmental activists were too eager to set population control as a priority on the eve of the 1974 Bucharest World Population Conference. The Catholic Church could surely not subscribe to family planning nor be involved in discussions that admitted contraception and abortion. As a result, the environment was relegated to the margins and eventually, in 1976, totally written off the agenda of the Pontifical Commission.⁴⁴

5. THE LEADERSHIP OF THE ENVIRONMENT DEVELOPMENT MOVEMENT

After Stockholm, Barbara Ward became increasingly committed to the idea of sustainability. As the head of the IIED, she had the opportunity to "continue the leadership of the environment development movement, a leadership she found universally acknowledged on her emergence from the Stockholm conference".⁴⁵ Even more intensely than before, she became

⁴³ All quotes are from WARD 1973: 22, 53, 60, 67.

⁴⁴ See also Piccioni's article in this issue.

⁴⁵ STRONG 2003: 26.

the powerhouse behind global initiatives. For example, she had a considerable role in the 1974 Cocoyoc Group, an expert gathering summoned by UNEP and UNCTAD. These were the years of the New International Economic Order, and Ward made an effort to come to terms with radical ideas from the developing countries coalesced in the G77. The Cocoyoc document was elaborated by a mixed group of experts – the economists around Ward and prominent personalities and economists in the G77 – and was meant to foster a strategic convergence with developing countries and their pledge to reform the international system more equitably.⁴⁶ Ward's concern with promoting growth and social justice focussed on diminishing the gap between rich and poor by "containing the excesses of capitalism and the exaggerated ambitions of the nation-state" was written into the document, which also mentioned avoiding excesses of consumption and waste.

Ward's activity on environment-development initiatives was restless. Immediately after Cocoyoc, she began preparing for the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, known as the Habitat Conference, held in Vancouver, Canada (May 31-June 11, 1976). The problem of population and megalopolises overwhelmed by downtrodden urban migrants living in suburban slums was one of her constant worries. Habitat concluded that human settlements should be regulated to protect the environment and that recycling should become standard practice. In 1977 Ward inspired the North-South Commission (or Brandt Commission). At the same time, she became the first chairperson of the North-South Roundtable: "a self-selecting elite" of internationalists that intercepted the last gasps of the cause for the new international economic order.⁴⁷ The Roundtable, including Maurice Strong and Mahbub ul Haq, discussed energy issues and actions to confront the economic crisis. Sustainability became immediately crucial. It was not just about development but about the rational use of resources. Developing countries were urged to assess their energy needs, whereas developed countries ought to put more effort into technological development for renewable and non-renewable energy supplies.

Opening the meeting of the North-South Roundtable in Colombo in August 1979, Ward tackled the multifaceted worldwide crisis.⁴⁸ On top of

⁴⁶ The UNEP/UNCTAD symposium participants adopted the resolution on "Patterns of Resource Use, Environment and Development Strategies". Cocoyoc, Mexico, October 8-12, 1974.

⁴⁷ JOLLY 2007: 48-51.

⁴⁸ "Statement by The Chairman of the Society for International Development Barbara Ward", Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 1979, HAEU, Fonds Giulio Fossi, GF 144.

the list of international concerns was food scarcity, which was bound to worsen because of climate change – climate instability was the locution used. The current situation, she argued, was reminiscent of the great depression, “a new sinking after the complacency and success of the 50s and 60s and the bewildered inability after the double shock over troubled prices for grain and oil to produce any sustained and workable strategies in the 1970s”. Worldwide, it was necessary to think of a “creative relationship of common need and absolutely mutual interest”, using aid to promote worldwide growth and consumption: “These countries’ demand creates more jobs in America than new housing or a fixed business investment”, she commented hinting at the potential of joining forces with developing countries. Avoiding a 1930s-like depression was crucial and a constant reference in Ward’s views since the early works written in the 1950s. The way to go was cooperation and solidarity, like in the Marshall Plan. What was needed was “a 20-year food, forest, energy and resource plan to “create markets for all the new and old industrialised states and bring humanity together in the pursuit of common goals”. The World Bank and regional banks were to work together toward the common goal, involving socialist countries and devoting the money spent on weapons to “the works of peace” as a viable prospect for humanity.⁴⁹ Ward commented: “Visionary – you will say – impracticable, idealist, utopian, ridiculous but [...] if we do not dream today, tomorrow will belong to those who do”.⁵⁰

In her final book, *Progress for a Small Planet*, Ward specifically discussed the role of energy, the new trending topic. She insisted on a unique position for Europe and the importance of the Marshall Plan as a model for action. Europe had to substitute the US as the champion of aid. It had to lead the way toward a new political, ethical and social conception, countering the threats posed by the scarcity of raw materials, overpopulation, and the irreversible degradation of the ecological balance. The time had come for Europe to genuinely support a new international economic order based on “a planetary compact” modelled on the Marshall Plan, with regional institutions as crucial actors able to supervise “the use of aid to ensure that it reached its true developmental and environmental goals”.⁵¹

Throughout the 1970s, Barbara Ward was a prominent individual with revolutionary visions for the future. It does not come as a surprise that *Time* magazine portrayed her as one of the 20th century’s most influential

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Barbara Ward quoted by Richard Jolly, in Foreword to GARTLAN 2010: IX.

⁵¹ WARD 1979: 251.

visionaries because of her engagement with development and the environment.⁵² Like several of her fellow development economists, ever since the late 1960s, she was concerned with the redistribution of wealth at a global level, facing the demands that developing countries voiced within the UN setting. After the Stockholm conference, she brought ecological balance into the equation. At the conference, she insisted that environmental considerations should be extensively coupled with developmental ones. After Stockholm, the novel concern with ecology whipped up her critique of aggressive capitalism and the arrogance of the nation-state. She continued to serve as a bridge between North and South in an era that was traversed by radical positions of Third World countries pressing for a New International Economic Order. In this, she was together with a group of like-minded intellectuals who believed that moving away from an economic course that was environmentally destructive and resource-consuming was urgent. Their ideas were probably not as influential as they may have wished. Ward believed in the people's capacity to change historical processes, overcoming the opposition of powerful vested interests. Her faith in the power of social movements in making the environment and social justice a priority may well be true in the long term, but in the mid-1970s, the results were not striking. Of course, her ideas shaped the final documents of the UN-sponsored world conferences related to environment and development (Stockholm in 1972, Cocoyoc and World Food Conference in 1974, Habitat Conference in 1976). Also, they became institutionalised in the new bodies built after each of these conferences.

Nonetheless, placing social justice and care for the environment at the centre of the international system was a short-lived project. It continued to be pursued within the UN by developing countries in a distinctive way, coupled with the necessity of a New International Economic Order. At the same time, though, the economic and energy crisis pushed developed countries' governments into prioritising different actions. Ultimately, the call for valuing interdependence while containing the excesses of capitalism and the exaggerated ambitions of the nation-state did not prevail. On the contrary, as the crisis deepened, neoliberalism triumphed politically over the other options under consideration.⁵³

⁵² GOLDEN 2000.

⁵³ SLUGA 2021: 6.

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