

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

In its issue of August 1972, International Review published an account of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held last June at Stockholm, and pointed out at the time the significance of this conference, at which Mr. H. Beer, Secretary General of the League of Red Cross Societies, underlined, in his address, the part that the Red Cross movement plays and will increasingly play in the struggle for the protection of the human environment that is today menaced with ruin.

At another more recent meeting, at Geneva, Mr. M. F. Strong, Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, addressing a session of the League's Executive Committee, complimented the Red Cross for assuming in this field a leading role, nationally and internationally, for which, he said, the Red Cross was particularly well qualified, "based on its long experience in dealing with environmental health, urban development, population, war, poverty, education, youth and natural disasters". After expressing his very deep appreciation for Red Cross help in solving those problems with which the newly-created United Nations Office which he directs was concerned, Mr. Strong concluded that the universality of the Red Cross and its emphasis on involving youth in community action, particularly qualify that organization to get results, and to arouse public opinion for the good of all of us in this challenging field. Protection of man, a traditional role of the Red Cross, now includes protection of the human environment.

In this context, a particularly significant passage from one of the speeches delivered at Stockholm is of special interest.¹ Mr. R. Maheu,

¹ See UNESCO Chronicle, Paris, 1972, No. 8-9.

Director General of UNESCO, after having underlined the work already performed by UNESCO with regard to environmental problems, went on to say:

... But however interesting, and indeed important, they may be in themselves, the full significance of these activities can be appreciated only when they are related to the underlying considerations that govern them. It may be useful now to define those considerations.

First of all, there is the wish to understand the present-day significance of environmental problems, evident in the sudden upsurge of anxiety which in so many countries has brought these problems, almost overnight, to the forefront of governmental concerns. Can this anxiety, which some regard as betokening the "great fear" of the year 2000, be explained solely by the all too real deterioration in man's physical and biological surroundings, which is to be noted practically everywhere and is, indeed, extremely serious? It would appear not. What we call the environmental crisis is essentially one feature—and a major feature—of a crisis in civilization. That is to say the alarm, or even the horror, evoked by man's treatment of nature and the enormities of the environment that he has made for himself, outweigh all other fears, including even those which we may now feel for the very survival of our species. In other words, what most terrifies men today is man himself: it is what they are discovering of his power and even more, of his will to "debase himself", and the world with him. In considering the changes and the damage brought about by man's own actions in his surroundings, we are uncovering what is most basic and most inward in modern man.

The rejection by the young of certain aspects of industrial society, the forecasts of economists who have taken sudden fright at the effects of exaggerated quantitative growth, scientific studies showing the limitations and the precariousness of our planet's resources, sociologists' surveys recording the ravages attributable to unbridled and chaotic urban development, the prophetic protest of the arts which is revolutionizing the significant background to

daily life—these are the main symptoms of this state of crisis. In this context, it would be difficult, and even artificial, to dissociate questions that are closely linked by their far-reaching interactions. For instance, environmental, population and development problems are inextricably bound up with each other. A round-table meeting of young scientists, recently invited to discuss them at Unesco House, drew attention to the essential unity of these issues and examined them all in the light of the fundamental and all-embracing question: what kind of man do we wish to be? The form of society and the face of the world tomorrow will depend on the answer to this question.

An analysis of this sort suggests certain conclusions. The first is probably that the concept of human environment cannot be treated as a particular idea marking off an isolated sphere of man's life and activity. Indeed, a large number of difficulties met with in regard to the environment are due to the very fact that the aims and the actions of individuals and communities have all too often been determined by a piecemeal approach.

It is therefore important to foster a perception of the problems which will embrace and at the same time transcend a multitude of aspects coming under different disciplines, and will call simultaneously on a whole range of techniques for changing specific situations marked by the complexity of interrelations within them. Admittedly, this interdisciplinary method of study and action is not easy to apply in practice. It presupposes a change in the educational and psychological outlook of research scientists, and indeed a new type of general education. At the same time, if the interdisciplinary approach is to avoid sinking into a slough of imprecision, it must continue to be based on sectoral studies and programmes of action which, in their turn, presuppose a sound body of knowledge in the various branches of investigation. The comprehensive approach is still, nevertheless, a prime necessity and must, ultimately, aim at being completely all-embracing.

As so aptly expressed in your motto, we have "only one earth". Above and beyond the problems of the nations, there are therefore problems of mankind as a whole which transcend State frontiers

and call for rational international co-operation throughout the world.

We must not, however, on that account, lose sight of the diversity of mankind, made up, as it is, of many nations, a multitude of groups and individuals, cherishing different ideas about society and different values and, above all, most unequally endowed with the good things of this shared earth. On closer inspection, we find that most environmental problems are not really world-wide in character but, rather, display a multiplicity of regional, national and local features. When considered in their factual context, or in other words against their real socio-economic and socio-cultural background, apparently similar problems are found not to lend themselves to uniform solutions. To put it plainly, legitimate concern with the future of the human race on earth must not blind us to the injustice and disorder at present prevailing or cause us to forget that priorities for action necessarily depend on particular situations and ways of thinking.

How, for example, are we to define the idea of the "quality of life", to which reference is so often made, if we disregard the profound cultural, economic and social differences that exist between peoples? How can we fail to see that, in many cases, a number of environmental problems have their origin in the limited choices available, particularly in the developing countries, for the planned use of land and natural resources? The unity and diversity of the world, the contrasting requirements of these two aspects of one and the same reality, the oppositions between the general necessities of the survival of the species and the particular necessities of justice and the dignity of actual societies as history and geography have fashioned them, are central to the discussions of this conference...
