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"Earth Summit": UN Spectacle with a Cast of Thousands

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Murray Weidenbaum

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"Earth Summit": UN Spectacle with a Cast of Thousands

Murray Weidenbaum

It is ironic that, while the world hails the abandonment of totalitarian government in Eastern Europe and the rebirth of its private sector, an ambitious but overlooked effort is underway to expand governmental power on a global scale. In the guise of cleaning up the environment, the first UN-sponsored "Earth Summit" is scheduled for Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. An examination of the extensive preparations shows why this event is worthy of some attention ahead of time.

Officially known as the UN Conference on Environment and Development or UNCED, this ten-day event is expected to be the largest conference ever held in the world. At the Earth Summit, the various national governments will be asked to endorse a wide-ranging agenda. This includes both an unprecedented "Earth Charter" and a more specific "Agenda 21." The Earth Charter, we are told, will embody the basic principles which "must govern the economic and environmental behavior of peoples and nations to ensure our common future" (see the box on page 2 for details).

Agenda 21 — presumably covering the 21st century — is described as "a blueprint for action in all major areas affecting the relationship between the environment and the economy." That umbrella certainly covers a lot of terrain, as we will see. It surely is quite an open-ended mandate for any one meeting and any one group of participants.

It is difficult to estimate this far in advance the exact number of people who will attend: official governmental representatives,

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Issues Earth Summit Will Address

- Improvement in the quality of life and human health
- Protection of the atmosphere
 - Climate Change
 - Depletion of the ozone layer
 - Transboundary air pollution
- Protection of land resources
 - Deforestation
 - Soil Loss
 - Desertification
 - Drought
- Conservation of biological diversity
- Protection of freshwater resources
- Protection of oceans, seas, and coastal areas
 - Rational use and development of their living resources
- Environmentally sound management
- Prevention of illegal traffic in toxic products and wastes
- Improvement in living and working conditions of the poor
 - Eradicating poverty
 - Stopping environmental degradation

Source: UN Department of Public Information, *In Our Hands: Earth Summit*, DPI/1118, March 1991.

supporting technical experts, officials of non-governmental organizations (including ecologists, architects, scientists, business executives, feminists, student leaders, indigenous Indians, social workers, and spiritualists) and, inevitably, the large aggregations of media people. Conference planners anticipate anywhere from more than 10,000 to as many as 100,000 participants. It is easy, in contrast, to envision the grandstanding that all sorts of activist groups can engage in at such a jamboree — presumably at the expense of serious decision making.

Three out of the four preparatory sessions already have been held. The fourth, and presumably crucial, advance meeting is scheduled for New York City in March 1992. Thus, it seems appropriate to acquaint the public with the flurry of planning activity now taking place. The tone for all the deliberations is being set by Maurice Strong, the Secretary-General of the conference. In the official UN material, he warns of "the environmental crisis which threatens the collapse of the planet."¹

Given this somewhat hysterical approach to the entire proceedings, it is not surprising that the conference planners sound very confused on the details. For example, they tell us that, "before agreeing on what must be done, the conference must devise plans for sustainable economic development."²

Global Redistribution of Income

The Conference Secretariat is proposing an impressive array of global goals: eradicating poverty, reversing the destruction of renewable resources, and changing the system of incentives and penalties that motivate economic behavior. The careful reader will note that environmental concerns are sandwiched in between two proposals for funda-

mentally changing the allocation and distribution of economic resources (read, income and wealth).

Nevertheless, the planners for the event expect Earth Summit to produce the means to carry out this economic agenda on a worldwide basis. The idea is to do so by making available to developing countries the additional financial resources and environmentally sound technologies they require to participate fully in global environmental cooperation.

Where are those "additional financial resources" and "environmentally sound technologies" going to come from? The answer provided in the conference materials is clear: from the nations that are already industrialized. Not surprisingly, at the preliminary planning sessions, the representatives of the industrialized nations have objected to this "blank check" approach. According to one observer, the industrialized nations have seen too much foreign aid spent on military build-ups rather than education, too many examples of "corrupt people [in certain Latin American countries] just pushing the money into their banks."³

Representatives of developing nations, however, respond that they will not agree to take the necessary environmental actions until the developed nations pledge in advance to pay for them and to supply the needed technology (without compensation, to be sure). According to Earth Summit Secretary-General Strong, paying for the needed environmental protection and related economic reforms will entail "a fundamental change in our economic systems." Thus, he expects the Summit to move environmental issues "into the center of economic policy and decision making."⁴

As we have seen in the rapid expansion of costly domestic regulation, if a proposal bears the environmental label, it is very difficult to oppose it. Moreover, if and when voting occurs on these issues, the issues will not be settled, as they often were in the suc-

cessful alliance during the recent Gulf War, by the member nations of the Security Council, which is dominated by the major powers. Rather, as is more typical at United Nations meetings, each nation participates in the decision making. In that regard, the developing nations (which category includes a great number of very small sovereign units) will have an overwhelming advantage: St. Kitt's 40,000 people have the same vote as France's 56 million; Antigua's 64,000, the same as the United States' 250 million.

The developing nations will have an overwhelming advantage in deciding the outcome of Earth Summit: St. Kitt's 40,000 people have the same vote as France's 56 million; Antigua's 64,000, the same as the United States' 250 million.

We are also told that it is likely that Earth Summit will agree to tap a variety of funding sources to transfer income from the developed to the developing nations. Proposals already identified include the radical notion of charging for the use of what is called the "global commons." Specific examples provided are staggering to anyone concerned with freedom of international commerce: requiring operators of airplanes and ships to pay for the use of the atmosphere and the oceans, for instance!

At least the planners of Earth Summit cannot be accused of having a hidden agenda. Their sweeping vision of where the largest-conference-ever-held will lead is clearly revealed in their literature. According to the U.S. Citizens Network for Earth Summit, the conference "must also attack poverty, indebt-

edness, trade and aid, and induce all nations to embrace the concept of 'sustainable living.'" All that is part of an effort "to exercise responsibility for the planet as a whole." (See the appendix for a working draft of the Earth Charter prepared by the U.S. Citizens Network on UNCED.)

Many of the environmental assertions in the UN materials on the Earth Summit rest on a shaky scientific foundation.

One bias is evident throughout: the downplaying of the need of the poor nations to develop their own economies. The lessons recently furnished by the dramatic events in Eastern Europe are totally ignored: governments do not provide the ability to develop backward economies; modern high-tech enterprises do. The conference planners should consider the environmental and economic backdrop that will be provided by the slums of Rio and the children wandering in the streets. Developed, capitalistic nations, in contrast, generate the resources to clean up environmental pollution and we do so.

Thus, it is sad to read the writings of the Poverty and Affluence Working Group, a non-governmental organization actively participating in planning for Earth Summit (in the UN procedures, designated "non-governmental organizations can take part in official meetings, including speaking and not just observing"):

People are poor because they have no power. Any new effort to deal with poverty and promote sustainability must focus on empowerment. UNCED must support the development of policies, programmes and processes which enable the poor to become powerful.⁵

This demagogic approach stands in striking contrast to the methods used so success-

fully by Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and other Asian rim countries in expanding their economies and raising their living standards. Rather than trying to accumulate power in order to take wealth from others, their people have worked hard, saved and invested, and created new wealth.

Scientific Shortcomings

Many of the assertions in the UN materials on the Earth Summit rest on a shaky scientific foundation. For example, oil is described as one of the fuels "which irreversibly damage the environment." That unsupported assertion runs counter to all the experience with oil spills around the world; nature typically reasserts itself, sooner or later. Also, the UN materials state as fact that global warming problems "grew more serious" since 1987, whereas scientific experts disagree among themselves.

We are also told that the charter may encompass the "precautionary principle," defined as a commitment to act to prevent worsening environmental conditions before all the scientific proof is available. Along these lines, a convention (in UN parlance, that is not a meeting, but a binding international agreement) on global warming is high on the agenda of the Earth Summit. The precautionary principle is being advanced along with proposals for "institutional changes" to strengthen the existing UN Environment Program and other UN agencies. A major element of these institutional changes would be giving these international organizations new enforcement powers.

On other occasions, the UN's preparatory materials border on simple-minded propaganda. In pushing for renewable forms of energy, the UN staff writes that "equipment to harness such energy, once made available to the consumer, can last for years."⁶ That may sound impressive at first blush, but there is nothing special about that. Equipment for

non-renewable energy sources lasts for decades. Key considerations, ignored by the conference planners, are the relative costs of the two alternatives as well as the hazards involved in operating the different equipment.

The Sustainable-Development Illusion

Much of the preparatory material for Earth Summit deals with the relationship between economic development and environmental impact, and especially the notion of "unsustainable" patterns of consumption. Yet, there is nothing to indicate why a given pattern of consumption is "unsustainable."

The ignorance of economic history as well as of basic economic analysis pervades explanatory materials issued by the Earth Summit planners.

Specifically, little if any attention is given to the role of economics, and especially of the price system, in allocating resources and in avoiding resource depletion. The conference planners seem oblivious to the adjustment process that has successfully worked over the centuries. As specific resources became relatively scarce, their prices rose sharply; enterprises were thereby encouraged to develop alternatives and consumers shifted the pattern of their purchases. The successive — and successful — movements from whale oil to kerosene to modern means of illumination were accomplished without a panoply of governmental powers and interagency directives. The marketplace produced the economic incentives to avoid resource "depletion." That favorable experience surely runs counter to the many failed gov-

ernmental efforts to "conserve" or "produce" energy.

The ignorance of economic history as well as of basic economic analysis pervades explanatory materials issued by the Earth Summit planners. The key reason offered for requiring the industrialized countries to pay for the environmental cleanup in the developing nations is that supposedly the developed economies have benefitted from "the unfettered use of the earth's natural resources." This theme is repeated so frequently in the UN publications that it virtually becomes gospel. However, all this ignores the fact that private ownership of key resources (ranging from forests to petroleum) has encouraged the owners to avoid wasting those resources and to attempt to use them in their most valuable capacity. The price system, the planners forget, is a far more effective allocator of scarce resources than the dictates and practices of politicized decision making.

Moreover, the Earth Summit planners, like so many other governmental officials, overlook the shortcomings in their own backyard. For example, Secretary-General Maurice Strong focuses virtually exclusively on "business and industry," especially in the developed nations, as the primary polluters of the environment. He simply ignores the vast amounts of environmental damage caused by government agencies at all levels as well as by other sectors of the private economy, including agriculture and consumers, in developing as well as developed economies.

Carrying out Earth Summit Decisions

Agenda 21 will not be legally binding. Yet, the UN staff goes on to note that "it is expected" that governments adopting it will be highly committed to its implementation. The cast of tens of thousands — and the resulting media coverage — will surely be in-

timidating to political leaders. The experience with other "voluntary" UN position statements is enlightening. Although the World Health Organization's guidelines on the marketing of infant formula technically were not compulsory, a worldwide boycott and pressures from religious and consumer activists forced Nestle and other manufacturers to comply with the WHO guidelines.

As environmental economist Gordon Brady has noted, the term "international agreement" has been corrupted to mean much more than formal treaty agreements legitimated by majority rule decisions of member governments. In the UN, those "agreements" often are based on committee recommendations and interim scientific reports which have neither final nor peer review status.⁷

The Earth Summit planners envision creating a super agency known as the Sustainable Development Commission, to which all UN bodies, agencies, programs, and Convention Secretariat would be accountable. Surprisingly, little attention is given in the available write-up to the operation of such an unusual organization.⁸

We are also informed that "institutional arrangements" are needed to improve the UN's ability to respond to emergencies such as Bhopal and the Valdez oil spill which, we are told, are likely to occur more frequently in the future. No reason is given for that forecast and no mention is made of the responsibility of individual, sovereign nations. The Big Brother attitude of the conference and its Secretary-General is hardly veiled. As he states the matter, "We need to hold governments accountable and they need to be told what we want."⁹

Logistical Concerns

Security is likely to be one of the key problems facing the people who will be con-

ducting Earth Summit proceedings. Reportedly, 60 percent of the budget will be devoted to security. Logistical arrangements will be a related challenge. Only 12,000 suitable hotel rooms are estimated to be available and embassies are already battling over who stays at the Sheraton and who gets the Crazy Love Motel.

The greens have vetoed the installation of air-conditioning in the conference because the equipment emits CFCs. An "authentic" Indian village is being built for the Indigenous People's Conference, an event related to Earth Summit. However, the Indians apparently do not desire to stay in the grass huts being built for them, but want the same modern hotel rooms accorded to the other participants.

*When Earth Summit is all over,
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The normally sympathetic associate editor of *Earthwatch*, Burkhard Bilger, warns of "the self-serving mobs at the Earth Summit."¹⁰ Activist organizations hope to gather women from the Rio slums to surround the conference hall and bang cooking pots and pans. Supposedly, that cacophony will represent the "reality" that governmental delegates should respond to in their deliberations.

Conclusion

There is one forecast that can be made on the basis of the experience with earlier UN efforts to develop grandiose schemes for controlling the economies of the member nations — such as Law of the Sea Treaty, Shipping Conventions, the Moon Treaty, and Consumer Product Guidelines. The dust will

settle only after lots of hoopla, emotional debates, and, of course, extensive media coverage. The conference planners will gripe that they had to settle for half a loaf and the critics will be able to contend that they succeeded in knocking out the zaniest ideas. Nevertheless, when Earth Summit is all over, the UN agencies will have achieved a substantial accretion of power over economic activity and will start planning on the next round of such endeavors. The most likely specific output of the June 1992 conference is a climate convention to reduce so-called "greenhouse" gases.¹¹

Meanwhile, the buildup to Earth Summit will provide an abundance of overblown rhetoric. To quote from the UN's publication, *Earth Summit in Focus, Number 3*, as an example, "Once the four billion people in developing countries start driving cars, the world will be looking at global disaster." The Earth Summit planners, however, seem up to meeting that challenge — at least in terms of public relations. They suggest that an informal Earth Covenant should be signed by millions of people all over the world, "symbolizing their commitment to work for the sustainability of the planet."¹² Between now and June 1992, we should brace ourselves for an unprecedented outpouring of high decibel, emotionalized, self-righteous, and unscientific exaggerations.

The Earth Charter

Preamble:

We, the peoples of the world and the representatives of the nations, understand that the Earth is a unique, whole, and interdependent system. In the face of our grave planetary crisis, we are conscious that many of our past perceptions and present global relationships are no longer adequate. Therefore, we declare these principles to recover the Earth's integrity, to secure the future of life, and to teach ourselves and our children that whatever we humans do to the web of life, we do to ourselves.

Principles:

- I. Planetary Unity — The Earth, with its diverse life forms, is a functioning whole. We have the inescapable obligation to respect all life and Earth's eco-systems.
- II. Global Interdependence — The Earth community, of which humankind is a part, functions in interrelated cycles, processes, and systems upon which life depends. This reality forms a basis for all social, cultural, scientific, economic, legal and political arrangements.
- III. Human Community — Regardless of diverse expressions, languages and cultures, humanity is one. All individuals have the fundamental rights to freedom, equality and an environment adequate for their health and well-being. Individuals, peoples, and nations must act in partnership to ensure the integrity and health of the planet.
- IV. Sustainable Development — Authentic progress in the human community must foster a sustainable and regenerative Earth order. Only within this framework can individuals realize their unique potential, both for themselves and in service to the common good.
- V. Universal Responsibility — The human capacity for learning about and making decisions on the environment requires all individuals, peoples, business enterprises, institutions, and governments to act as guardians of the Earth. All must live in bal-

ance with nature to ensure the continuity and quality of life for future generations.

Implementation:

The principles set forth in the present Charter shall be reflected in the law and practice of each state, as well as at the international level.

I. Social

- A. The elements of each culture which contribute toward a united, global, and harmonious society should be fostered. Cultures based on over-consumption of the world's resources must adapt to reflect ecological realities.
- B. Local groups have the right to participate in the decision making processes that affect their lives and their regions. The achievement of sustainable development requires the full recognition of the importance of indigenous cultures.
- C. Women shall be accorded full partnership in all fields of human endeavor. Such a partnership is fundamental to society's sustainability.
- D. Education should be available to all individuals in all nations. Such education should promote the consciousness of the common heritage of humanity and the integral connection between humankind and the larger world of nature.
- E. Information on activities and products which alter the natural environment must be made available in terms comprehensible to the public at large.
- F. International organizations and member states should make concerted efforts to slow the dramatic growth in world population by encouraging fair standards of living for all and making family planning services available to all on a voluntary basis.
- G. Institutions at all levels of society must adopt practical forms of problem solving at the most basic, workable level to remain true to the requirements of universal responsibility and participation.

II. Scientific

- A. Constant efforts shall be made to increase knowledge of environmental and socio-cultural conditions by scientific research and to disseminate such knowledge without restriction.
- B. The worldwide monitoring system to collect scientific data on the Earth's atmosphere and environment should be expanded by pooling the resources of scientists of all nations.
- C. Environmental risks, and the state of the planet, should be openly discussed and clear information provided to the public about potential hazards and risks.
- D. All means must be employed to avoid irreversible harm to the environment.

III. Economic

- A. Economic indicators which reflect full allocation of natural and human resources must serve as the basis of all international institutional lending practices, national accounting systems, and business and trade accounts.
- B. In economic planning preference must be given to long-term sustainable development over short-term gains and special interests.
- C. Priority must be given to the alleviation of poverty and the attendant harm that poverty brings to people and the environment.
- D. The principles of the free market, particularly when they are exercised by multinational corporations, must be exercised within the context of a regulatory framework designed to protect a sustainable and just global society.
- E. The capacity of the Earth to produce vital renewable resources must be maintained, restored, or improved.
- F. The non-renewable resources of the Earth must be employed in such a way as to guard against the danger of their future exhaustion and to ensure that benefits from such employment are shared by all humankind.

- G. All nations equitably share the responsibility for ensuring a healthy environment. The ability of developing countries to fulfill this responsibility shall be taken into account.
- H. Wealth and progress must be democratically redefined in light of this Earth Charter.

IV. Legal/Political

- A. Far reaching legal and institutional changes, including new global institutions, supported by universally agreed upon enforceable laws, must be implemented to achieve a sustainable and just global society.
- B. The strengthening of the United Nations, its constituent organizations, and multilateral institutions is necessary to ensure peace, social equity, environmental security and economic well-being for all the world's peoples.
- C. No nation shall plead sovereign immunity in light of overriding global emergencies or catastrophes.

V. Global Security

- A. International institutions and nations should regard environmental concerns as a pre-eminent global security issue.
- B. Global and regional environmental issues must be an integral part of the agenda and operations of the Security Council of the United Nations, and of the national security agencies of all nations.
- C. Precautionary measures to protect global environmental security should be supported by all nations and local governments, even in the absence of scientific certainty.
- D. States shall use natural resources of the global commons in a safe, reasonable, and equitable manner.
- E. Consultation must replace confrontation and domination in order to gain the cooperation of the family of nations in devising and implementing measures to preserve the Earth's ecological balance. Nations should drastically reduce mili-

tary expenditures and allocate those funds into environmental security and sustainable goal development.

- F. All nations shall report immediately environmental accidents of a transnational nature.
- G. Nations and the appropriate international bodies share a joint responsibility to respond to transnational environmental disasters with full assistance. Nations and international institutions must guarantee that all victims of such transnational environmental accidents receive non-discriminatory treatment.
- H. Social structures and institutions at all levels must be dedicated to achieving harmony among people, nations and the Earth.

Adoption:

The overwhelming challenge of the global crisis compels us to exercise responsible care for our endangered planet. Each person, public and private entity, and national and international body, has a duty to act in accordance with the provisions of the present Charter and shall strive to ensure that the objectives and requirements of the present Charter are met. Therefore, we, the undersigned peoples of the Earth and the representatives of the nations, hereby adopt this Earth Charter.

Source: Angela Harkavy, "The Results of Prep-COM III: The Third Preparatory Committee Negotiating Session for UNCED" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Citizens Network for UNCED, November 1991).

Notes

1. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, *Earth Summit in Focus, Number 1*, UN Document DPI/1160 (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, September 1991), p. 1.
2. Ibid.
3. Burkhard Bilger, "Earth Summit," *Earthwatch*, November 1991, p. 13.
4. Ibid.
5. Cited in Angela Harkavy, "The Results of PrepCOM III: The Third Preparatory Committee Negotiating Session for UNCED" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Citizens Network for UNCED, November 1991), p. 11.
6. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, *Earth Summit in Focus, Number 3*, UN Document DPI/1161 (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, September 1991), p. 2.
7. Gordon L. Brady, "Greenthreats? The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development," *International Freedom Review*, Spring 1991, p. 49.
8. *Earth Summit in Focus, Number 1*, p. 6.
9. Ibid., p. 8.
10. Burkhard Bilger, "Earth Summit," p. 13.
11. Brady, "Greenthreats?," p. 38.
12. *Earth Summit in Focus, Number 1*, p. 6.