

ENVIRONMENT AS A FACTOR OF PEACE

Today, the environmental news are so negative, between the accelerating climate change, loss of biological diversity, health problems from pollution, and many other ways that we misuse our planet and its resources, that we can forget that the environment can also be a factor of peace. Environmental security is a fundamental component of human security, and this is as true in the Balkans as in every other part of the world.

One reason for the potential use of the environmental issues for peace and reconciliation is that they are generally based on scientific evidence, which is in itself politically neutral. A toxic chemical is as threatening to the people to the right as to the left of the political spectrum, and from all ethnic groups. Climate change is affecting all countries, rich and poor, even if the poor are more vulnerable and less able to compensate the damage done. The environment is also the subject of growing public concern, which can make it easier for politicians to take action.

Furthermore, many environmental problems are transboundary in nature. Air pollution does not stop at a political border. A river catchment may include several countries, with watershed mismanagement, water use or pollution upstream affecting other countries downstream. Migratory species may cross many countries without belonging to any of them. The Adriatic, the Mediterranean coast and the Black Sea are shared resources. For all of these, countries must collaborate for effective environmental management, and many regional conventions have been negotiated to provide the framework for peaceful cooperation in the situations that might otherwise lead to tension and even a conflict.

Today, as human society and the economy globalize and reach planetary limits, global environmental challenges are forcing all countries to find the means and political will to work together. Just as a quarrelling family will unite when faced with a common threat, so are all nations increasingly recognizing that issues like stratospheric ozone depletion, climate change and planetary resource limits for food, water, energy, and other natural resources can only be addressed through united global action with common but differentiated responsibilities.

All sections of society at all organizational levels are implicated in the environmental challenges facing us, requiring multiple levels of environmental management. Where global warming requires global legislation to guide an effective response, other problems are best addressed at the level of nations, ecoregions, watersheds, metropolitan areas or local government, while respecting the inter-relationships between the different levels.

In the situations like the Balkan one, with the recent history of conflict within and between countries, joint work on environmental security can be one of the best ways to begin to rebuild trust and confidence. As early as 1974, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) created the Regional Seas Programme in the Mediterranean where Greece and Turkey, Israel and Libya, and other antagonistic countries worked together to manage their shared sea and control its pollution in their common interest. Today, as we have already heard, this is being extended through the Barcelona Process. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and UNEP cooperate in environment and security activities to address joint problems and reduce tensions in the region.

These ECPD conferences have given an important place to religious tolerance as the foundation for peace. It is not often realized that the environment can be an important factor for inter-faith dialogue and collaboration. When I was asked on behalf of the United Nations to present environmental issues to the World Summit on Religions and Conservation, organized by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) at Windsor Castle in 1995, the leaders of nine major faiths including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for the Orthodox Church, the leading Bahá'í dignitary, and senior officials of the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the World Jewish Congress, the Taoist Association of China, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Shintoism agreed after four days of deliberations that they were in complete harmony on the issues of environment and conservation of nature. All the faiths teach respect for the creation and our responsibility for stewardship of the planet and its resources.

There have been many initiatives by religions and faith-based groups to share their understanding and to recognize their common concern for the environment. The Orthodox Church has organized a series of symposia on *Religion, Science and the Environment*, starting in the Mediterranean in 1995, then in the Black Sea (where I was the reporter), the Danube, the Adriatic, the Baltic, the Amazon and most recently the Arctic in 2007. The Catholic organization Pax Christi held a similar series of symposia on

ecology and spirituality with representatives of all the religions and other forms of spirituality in the village of Klingenthal near Strasbourg, France, from 1995 to 2001, the proceedings of which have been published. Such inter-faith events are important to build religious tolerance and mutual understanding.

In the Environmental Diplomacy Programme which I coordinate for UNEP, the University of Geneva and The Graduate Institute, in close collaboration with the University for Peace, we include a module on ethics, religion and science for environmental diplomacy. This gives the mid-career diplomats who come to learn how to negotiate difficult issues, like controlling greenhouse gas emissions or the international trade in toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes, a background in the basic values and ethical principles that must underlie effective international agreements. One Moslem diplomat was so impressed that he wrote a thesis proposing an Islamic Convention on the Environment to be signed by all Moslem countries to demonstrate that environmental action was rooted in Qu-ranic principles. The participants, including some from the Balkan region, also learn approaches to environmental security and governance, and other problems that need to be resolved between countries to reduce tension and ensure sustainability for all.

I therefore encourage the ECPD to include this environmental dimension in its important work for reconciliation, religious tolerance and human security in the Balkans.