

WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

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WCED/85/20 Part 1

Item 8 of the Provisional Agenda

PRELIMINARY CONTENTS OF
THE FINAL REPORT

W/0097C/ep/13.6.85

Commentary on the Contents of the Final Report
Note by the Director of Information

1. Initial discussions of the possible contents of the final report seem to indicate a natural grouping around two contrasting poles at the conceptual level. These reflect, on the one hand, the ambitions which underlie the language of the Mandate section of the Mandate, Key issues, Strategy and Workplan document and, on the other hand, the kind of material which will flow from the work of the Advisory Panels.
2. The former approach will naturally highlight linkages and interconnections whilst the latter will tend to reflect the sectoral grouping of the basic work processes of the Commission.
3. Evidently, there are other arrangements of subject matter and approach which lie between the two poles indicated above.

Linkage Emphasis

4. An approach emphasizing the linkages might begin with a comprehensive overview of the environmental crisis illuminated from the points of view (perspectives) of population, science and technology, etc. This outline of crises would lead to the objectives of the Commission as they relate to it. Particular attention would be given to the transcending themes of the mandates - sustainability, equity and others. The shortcomings of existing policies would follow next raising the expectation that new policies are to be proposed. Strategies behind new proposals would be seamed and threaded by the linkages and mutual influences of a new environmental optique. Then would flow the new policies in specific detail ranged cross-sectorally under such headings as - the use of marine resources - the cities of the future - drinking water and sanitation for all - improving health, etc.

From the holistic to the particular

5. Another approach might again begin with an introductory statement of the problematique referring to the alternative agenda but also bringing in more philosophical aspects such as the time horizons so deeply embedded in conventional economics, the problem of dealing with ignorance, uncertainty, and risk. The politics of environment and development would show up the complexity and interlinkages so characteristic of the environmental problematique.

Again, perspectives would come up front using transcending themes like sustainability and equity to sketch out the kind of world the Commission wants to see created. In other words, the essential ambitions of the Commission.

6. There would then arise a need to bridge the holistic section of the report with the section on specific action proposals. This might be achieved by adumbrating the global, regional and national strategies which address and introduce a number of key issues.
7. Lastly would come policies where the reports of the Advisory Panels would, as it were, clearly show through the fabric of the report. The overall trend would be from the general to the particular.
8. Another presentation concept might be introduced - that of forecasting (i.e. projections) and backcasting scenarios. Forecasting projections would suggest the state of the world with regard to specific issues using present trends mediated by present machinery. Backcasting would assert a state of affairs regarded as desirable at some point in the future. It would trace the necessary milestones on the way there. From this, specific medium and short-term objectives may be dissected out, thus justifying the specific policy objectives.

Sectoral and direct

10. Finally, it may be useful to look at an approach which is connected directly to the problems as presently perceived in their sectoral and institutional context.

11. In this approach, it would be necessary to outline the failings of our present ways of tackling environment and development problems. This would be followed by a summary of the main recommendations under "international co-operation", then "national machinery" headings. Industry and business recommendations would then be followed by sectoral items like agriculture, energy, human settlements, etc. The subsequent chapters would follow the order of the alternative agenda dealing with perspectives and then the subject areas of the Advisory Panels in an as yet-to-be decided order of priorities.
12. The various approaches have their pros and cons. If it is judged that specific ministries and ministers are the priority readership, it may be judged essential to label the appropriate sections unmistakably and place them at the beginning of the report. If, on the other hand, the linkages are felt to be paramount, another approach might be considered. Compromises which attempt to, as it were, transcend the poles might be defined in terms of major "nexuses". This might use the concepts of operational research to define groupings of the highest frequencies of desirable interconnections or actual interconnections in situations judged by the Commission to be model or ideal. This grouping of subject matter might be both novel and yet rooted enough in the conventional to claim attention in the appropriate quarters.

Readers' Expectations of Both Reports

13. It is perhaps useful to look at the problem from the opposite side and ask what do target readerships expect from the Commission's report?
14. It is likely that the Environment Ministers will wish to be able to say to their colleagues and their Prime Ministers or Presidents "Look at this report. It confirms what I have been saying all along, and it is even stronger than I have been in its recommendations on x,y, and z."

15. Other Ministers would probably look upon it as a second opinion delivered by an independent doctor who has examined the patient world. The doctor should have impeccable credentials but, being distant, may be expected to express the perceived truth more brutally.
16. Other readers with a concern for environment and development will look to it for a validation of some of the new attitudes beginning to crystallize and as a blueprint for specific actions with which they can encourage decision makers who they feel are lagging.
17. Another point to be made is that beyond the immediate circle of those concerned, the Commission's messages will be seen as through a mist, rather darkly. The Commission should give some attention then to the slightly out of focus shape of its major messages - and perhaps only three or four of these will come through.
18. Evidently, one message will be the imperative of anticipate and prevent rather than fix-it-when-we-can-afford-to.
19. A second might be a call for a greatly elevated place in the political pecking order for environment and development Ministers and protagonists.
20. A third (given the current massive social problem of unemployment) might be the concept that environmental restoration should become the accepted countercyclical element in the cycle of boom and recession permitting all the people to continue working for a better world even when temporarily thrown out of conventionally measured "productive" work.
21. A fourth might be a declaration that indeed society is ready for a change of mind-set and must reject the pre-environmental-awareness and world-without-limits array of accepted premises.
22. In any event, the public will grasp only a few large messages and it is sensible for the Commission to be conscious of this, however interesting and overwhelming the details of the Final Report might be in themselves.