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CONSERVING SOCIETY DEMANDS NEW GROWTH

by JANET ADES

No-one knows for sure the exact physical limits of our finite planet. It has become apparent, however, that we are running up against limits of some kind. Unemployment, inflation, pollution, energy and food shortages, unequal distribution of capital and resources -- all point to a need for alternatives to our traditional growth patterns.

How to achieve this was the topic explored at the 47th annual Couchiching Conference, sponsored by the Canadian Institute of Public Affairs in August. Some 200 delegates from the public and private sectors met near Toronto to consider the concepts of Growth in a Conserving Society.

In his opening address, Mr Maurice F. Strong, former Chairman of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), of Canada, said that although there are physical limits to growth, "the limits we are beginning to confront today are not primarily physical. They are limits of political and social will and of adequate institutional means to assure careful use of the earth's resources and equitable distribution of benefits and costs resulting from their use."

These limits do not however require us to abandon growth, he stressed. They demand a more mature kind of growth that is less physically oriented and less demanding of resources and the environment.

This new growth, echoed by most of the speakers, would emphasize quality rather than quantity, cooperation rather than competition, and wise, efficient use of resources. For the industrialized countries, this would

require a basic change in the values and expectations of people, a virtual cultural revolution.

No country can, however, make the transition to the "new growth" conserving society in isolation. As Mr Strong stressed, it requires the full participation and active cooperation of the developing countries. Mr Mahbub ul Haq, Director of Policy, Planning and Program Review at the World Bank, conveyed the interdependence of our globe in some statistics on the United States; "40 percent of exports are to the developing countries; one out of every three acres produces for export; one out of every eight jobs is dependent on exports to the developing countries."

But the developing countries face different problems. Speaking for the Third World, Mr Haq said that economic growth still remains a necessity. Conservation and environmental concerns are luxuries in the Third World, he said. Less developed nations are not so much worried about the quality of life as about life itself.

The problems of resource conservation and new environmental standards must take a second place to the problems of development. But this development he said, "should be built around our people, not our people around development. And we would like to focus on new development styles, centered around the basic needs of our societies." And as Mr Strong pointed out, if the needs of the developing world could be translated into real market demand, it would provide the kind of dramatic stimulus that would start the world's economic wheels turning vigorously again.

But, he cautioned, there is a danger in talking about problems on a global basis, that we will lapse into thinking that all solutions to them can be mounted only at the global level. Most of the actions required must be taken at the local and national levels. And the conference cited many examples of local efforts that are part of the solution, including community projects aimed at energy conservation, food production and recycling wastes. Jacques Gérin, assistant deputy minister of Environment Canada underlined that measures which are often locally significant, cumulatively have undeniable potential for impact. "And why not seek solutions?" he asked. "A focus on aggregates, on national figures and national policies would risk limiting us to traditional

options that are centralized, capital intensive and depletive of resources." Local projects, on the other hand, generate wealth that stays in the community and provide jobs.

This decentralized, self-reliant strategy may also be the best way for the Third World countries to develop, Dr Haq noted. Citing the differences between the development routes chosen by Pakistan, his home country, and China, he stressed that "the difference here was that a fundamental political choice was made in China to go a certain route ... And then flowed from it the relevant technology, improvisation, indigenous experimentation, and a sense of national self-confidence that if there is a Chinese problem there can be a Chinese solution." Speaking about both industrialized and developing nations, he added that "the choice has to be made originally not as a technocratic choice but as a political choice as to what are the development objectives and goals of society", stressing that technology must be developed within our own political, cultural, social frameworks.

But self-reliant strategies require that people become involved. "The capacity of governments to act depends in the final analysis on the will of the people", said Mr Strong. By creating an awareness of the issues involved, conferences such as the Couchiching Conference may help create that will.

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