

## A workshop in search of an agenda

**The recent London Workshop aimed at grand global decisions, but its agenda was sadly North-biased**

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**I**t was billed the 'London Workshop on Environmental Science, Comprehensiveness and Consistency in Global Decisions on Ocean Issues'. Quite a mouthful. But what's in a title?

Plenty. In the case of this workshop, hosted by the British government and co-sponsored by the Brazilian government (which had been solicited by the British government as representative of the developing countries) and held between 30 November and 2 December 1995, a more concise title might have helped focus the debate a bit sharper.

As it was, there was hardly an issue left unraised during this three-day meet. The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) was but one of the 30 or so international NGOs who participated at this meeting, where the agenda was not always clear, but where the floor was always open.

At first glance, the workshop title would seem to suggest a focus on the use of environmental science in global decision-making, and that issues of consistency and comprehensiveness would be major themes. Such naive assumptions were quickly dispelled.

Rather, the *raison d'être* of the workshop seemed to be to provide an opportunity to discuss the entire spectrum of policy issues relating to the use and abuse of the oceans. The only limiting factors were the time allocated, the delegates present and their own agendas.

It did not seem to bother the joint Chairs from UK and Brazil that the breadth of the agenda had expanded from the global to the universal. Questions like 'Should decisions on oceans issues include coastal zone management and issues on climate

change?' seemed as relevant as discussions on the difference between global issues and ubiquitous issues.

Thus it was that the term 'oceans' gradually became synonymous with the marine environment in general, and 'environmental science' came to include a wide variety of considerations.

The workshop was part of the British government's contribution to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development which will meet in March 1996 to review Chapter 17 (the so-called Ocean's Chapter) of Agenda 21 of UNCED. But how the issues raised will be taken forward through the UN process remains to be seen.

That it was possible to produce such a concise five-page, 24-point draft report outlining the conclusions of the co-chairmen following such a broad-based debate, is as much a tribute to their skills in chairing, as it is to the skills of the sessions' rapporteurs.

Earlier, the British Government Panel on Sustainable Development had recommended that "the (British) Government takes steps to promote the establishment of an inter-governmental Panel on the Oceans. Such a body, sponsored by the UN agencies concerned and similar in scope to the inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, could be set the task of examining the science, assessing the human impact, and putting in place a framework for the responsible management of the oceans, including fish stocks, marine resources and measures to cope with pollution."

### **Ambitious aims**

The London workshop was a response to this recommendation. The workshop set itself rather ambitious objectives.

It set out to discuss:

- the range and merit of the inter-governmental organizations addressing marine issues like fisheries, pollution etc;
- the extent to which there is suitable access to good science;
- the effectiveness of current arrangements where global actions are required; and
- the possible need for a global oceans panel.

Fifty States and about 25 intergovernmental and NGOs were invited to nominate delegates. Interestingly, of the 92 country delegates listed, over 70 per cent were from the North (Europe, the US, Canada and Australia), about 9 per cent were from Latin America and around 5 per cent were from African and Caribbean countries.

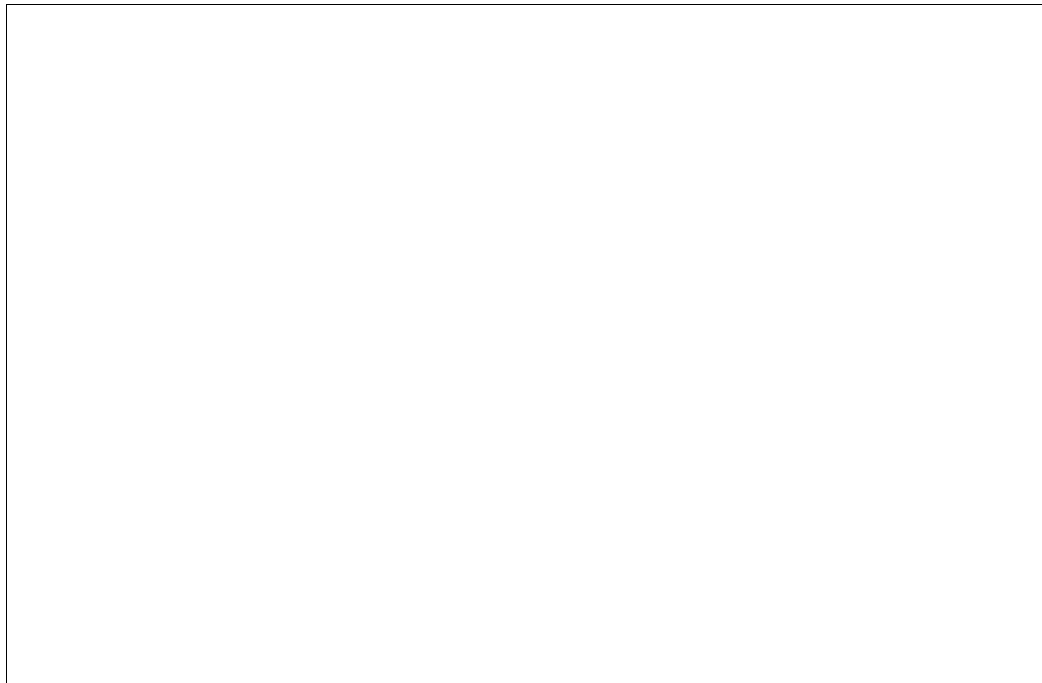
In addition, 11 international agencies were represented, and 31 NGOs. The latter two groups almost entirely comprised organizations and individuals from the North, while the NGOs included commercial interest groups (representing oil extraction and fisheries), consultants and environmental interest groups. Representation from the South was,

therefore, very weak. Despite this very skewed participant profile, the workshop structure over the three days offered the maximum opportunity for all delegates to participate.

“The first day provided an opportunity for delegates to listen and respond to the workshop agenda and the keynote paper, titled ‘What are the Key Pressure Point Issues Affecting the Sustainability of the Oceans?’, presented by Alastair Macintyre of the Marine Forum for Environmental Issues.

The second day began with an address from the UK Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer. The proceedings were then divided into three parallel panels, discussing different issues: Scientific and Policy Analysis; Successful Policy Formulation; and Successful Policy Implementation.

On the third day, the outputs of the three panels and the draft workshop report were discussed. The proposal for an intergovernmental Panel on the Oceans was rejected almost unanimously. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) described the multitude of international agencies already existing as an ‘alphabet soup’ of acronyms, which needed no more. However, most delegates seemed to agree that decision-making could be improved by better international coordination.



**T**he paper by WWF, titled ‘A Global Framework for the Responsible Management of the Oceans’, proposed that improvements could be made to the existing body of global and regional arrangements by designing a Global Framework. This could:

- identify and prioritize problems and solutions;
- mobilize financial and political support; and
- keep under review the implementation of principles and standards established at the global level.

The paper went on to discuss how such a framework could be established, how it would function, and how it would assist the role of the UN General Assembly in reviewing and evaluating the implementation of UNCLOS.

ICSF questioned how any new inter-governmental panel would fit into the current international hierarchy of inter-governmental bodies, and where it would receive its mandate from. It also noted that the collective experience of the many such already existing bodies seemed to show that most nations choose to ignore or modify the scientific advice given, according greater priority to satisfying political and commercial interests.

As would be expected from such a North-biased meeting, where so many scientists had gathered, there were many strong proposals for improving the quality of scientific data feeding into the global decision-making process, and for training scientists from the South. It was pointed out that scientific knowledge is but one system of knowledge and there were others.

In particular, for coastal communities in many parts of the world, decision-making was based on traditional knowledge and had been so for thousands of years. In the modern context, scientific knowledge and management systems tended, in many cases, to undermine traditional systems without being able to fully replace them. It was also noted that scientific knowledge

is value-laden and groups of scientists representing different interests (both national and commercial) were divided on which scientific data was correct.

Attention was also drawn to the importance of the social sciences and it was urged that they should be accorded the same importance as the physical sciences in global decision-making. One of the EU delegates pointed out that their own resource constraints imposed limitations on how the social sciences could be used in decision-making.

In the case of the EU, the Council of Fisheries Ministers only receives information on fish stocks and recommendations for TAC levels from DG XIV of the European Commission. The Commission does not provide the Council of Fisheries Ministers with social or economic data, as they have no budgetary provision to carry out socio-economic studies. To a great extent, therefore, decision-making tends to be more a product of political expediency than scientific recommendations, which is probably one of the reasons why the Common Fisheries Policy is in such a muddle.

It would seem that there is a great deal that the EU (and others) can learn from the Australian experience about the importance of integrating environmental, economic, social and scientific considerations into policy formulation.

In her presentation to the workshop, Annie Ilett, the Australian government delegate, pointed out that “ultimately decisions about the way in which the oceans are managed are political ones made by governments, but if they are not accepted by those most directly affected, they are likely to have little effect... Co-operative and integrated approaches, which take account of environmental, economic and social considerations, are crucial.”

**Various links**

Concerns were also raised about the links between the causes of poverty, its alleviation and issues relating to the environment. In particular, it was noted that environmental degradation affects the poorest people first and foremost and

that the least developed countries are least able to take effective actions to address environmental problems.

**T**he links and contradictions between trade and sustainable development were noted, and especially the potential impact of free trade on the environment. The ICSF delegate stressed that the implementation of Agenda 21 could easily be undermined by the establishment of the World Trade Organization and the implementation of GATT. Where the emerging economies of developing nations were being opened up to the full forces of the free market, poor coastal communities and fragile coastal resources had become extremely vulnerable. It was pointed out that a special Commission on Trade and the Environment has been set up and will deal with such issues.

There is clearly no shortage of information, issues and views to be fed into the CSD review of Chapter 17. Lessons of particular interest that derived from the workshop include:

'Ocean issues' know few boundaries, encompass the marine environment in general and include coastal zone management, ocean catchment areas, climatic concerns, natural resources exploitation, States' rights and responsibilities and technology transfer.

Environmental science is but one of several information sources that needs to feed into the policymaking process. Other scientific information deriving from the social sciences, political considerations, and an understanding of traditional knowledge and management systems are equally important.

There are multiple international organizations compiling, processing and publishing scientific information for decision-making on ocean issues. There are, however, often elements of competitiveness between organizations and interests that make such information value-laden and partial, and prone to misuse. There is also often a lack of co-operation and co-ordination between such organizations, which can exacerbate the misuse of information.

## Workshop papers

*What are the key pressure point issues affecting the sustainability of the oceans?* By Alastair Macintyre

*Ocean science and the sustainable use of the oceans: Definitions and current understanding* by Alan Longhurst


*Ocean science and policy issues* by John Steele

*Bringing environmental, economic, social and scientific considerations together in policy formulation: The way ahead* by Annie Ilett

*Global arrangements for ensuring management of the oceans, by the World Wide Fund for Nature, presented by* Indrani Lutchman

*Linking science and management: implementation based on the ICES Inter-governmental model* by Christopher Hopkins

The specific outputs from this workshop include two studies commissioned by the UK Government. One is on the extent to which there may be gaps in the existing international arrangements to manage the world's fish stocks. "The other is on the effectiveness of integrated action over marine resources and marine pollution.

In addition to the report of the co-chairmen, seven papers arose from the workshop (see box). These will feed into the UK Government's input to the CSD review of Chapter 17 of Agenda 21. 

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