

Anxious elites prosper at expense of disease-ridden poor

Introduction

While one part of the UN battles to preserve various parts of the world, such as Rwanda, East Timor and Kosovo from war, another, the Environment Programme, is trying to preserve us all from pollution. Recent meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Bonn demonstrate the desire of the world's green gurus to preserve us from all manner of pollutants ranging from power stations to cars and cows emissions. This meeting was treated with the usual hand-wringing from the media, who complained that we were doing too little too late, to save the planet from a runaway greenhouse. Meanwhile another treaty is moving ahead without the fanfare, but with a far more devastating effect.

Green bureaucrats and their careers

Prior to the Bonn climate meeting, the third meeting of the International Negotiating Committee (INC3) for the Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) met in Geneva and neared an agreed text for the elimination of POPs. In the year 2000 the final text will be agreed and signatory government ratification will begin. But it will be to no avail. The POPs to be banned are rarely used anymore and don't cause any real harm, despite those imagined by green groups. The convention appears pointless except that it will achieve the covert aim of its designers – to maintain an international bureaucratic elite.

Genuine anxiety or guilt manipulation?

The POPs treaty was briefly in the news for a weekend in August 1999 because the convention had proposed banning the use of DDT for malaria control. And it was to support the dwindling band of pro-DDT (for malaria control) scientists that I went to Geneva. As an observer I had no vote or even the right to intervene in any way in the process. But since much of the discussion takes place in the corridors I thought I might try my hand at lobbying delegates.

According to the head of the Malaria Project, Amir Attaran, most of the delegates he spoke to at INC1 (Vancouver, June 1998) were not aware of DDT's use in malaria control, and it's a credit to him and his colleague, Professor Wen Kalima from Tanzania, that by INC3 everyone knew. The Malaria Project and the Malaria Foundation International are groups of scientists concerned about the recent massive increase in malaria in many poor developing countries. They were worried that a phase out date for DDT of 2007 had been proposed by several environmental groups, including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and that no opposition from malaria patients had been prepared. Their success in grabbing media attention to the plight of the 2 million annual malaria victims was to have immediate effect at the meeting. As a result, an embarrassed spokesman for the WWF intervened in the first session to say that they were 'dropping discussion of deadlines' as these were unduly polarising the debate. It appeared that DDT had a stay of execution and my journey was wasted.

The lobbies are large

Nevertheless, as I listened to country delegates speak at the plenary sessions I discovered some interesting facts. UNEP pays (well, taxpayers really pay) for one delegate to attend from every UN country. For most poor countries, the UNEP-sponsored delegate was that country's sole representative, while the US team sent about 20 delegates, beaten in size by at least one environmental group.

Perhaps more surprising than the size of the environmental contingent was that almost none of the countries represented used the 10 intentionally produced POPs to be banned (2 POPs are industrial process bi-products). Indeed, following Western concerns many said they already had local

regulations or voluntary agreements restricting these POPs. Furthermore, better, safer, cheaper products continually displace older technologies, and so even the remaining uses in a few countries were becoming redundant. However, to accelerate the evolutionary change from POPs, poorer countries would need financial assistance. I lost count after 18 countries intervened to support this notion. It soon became clear that if the Northern countries wanted faster change they would have to pay for it.

And where is Africa?

It was obvious that the Northern countries were driving the process, even drafting the negotiating text without significant African input. This happened because UNEP failed to provide the francophone countries with a French-English interpreter for the African breakout session. In the first half of one session the Malaria Projects' Dr Attarran, a Canadian, interpreted, but the delegate from Egypt complained that he was from an NGO, and so this soon ceased. Eventually the South African delegate volunteered to interpret, but inevitably proceedings had been slowed. By the time the Africans had come up with an agreement, the debate had moved on in plenary. Their complaints and suggestions were left out and may be dealt with at a later stage.

If this was alarming, worse soon followed. No one could point to any scientific papers that demonstrated any real harm from POPs (except for some occupational use, when strict practices are observed). The claim that ambient concentrations of POPs can harm people in a local area, let alone hundreds or thousands of miles away, appears weak, and the latter would be essential to justify an international convention. The Inuit representatives intervened to remind everyone that their body fat contains higher (1 part per million) concentrations of DDT than other Canadians and that this may harm them (though no proper study has found any proof of this). Non statistically significant correlations between POPs accumulation and disease, from poorly designed studies, was the best 'evidence' anyone had to offer to demonstrate harm.

Does anyone care for the facts – or the poor?

Nevertheless, the NGOs were only interested in discussing alternatives to DDT in the halls outside the meeting. And it became clear that evidence of harm from POPs did not matter because the *raison d'être* of the Convention is the precautionary principle. The possibility that the Inuit or bald eagles *may* be harmed by POPs is enough for the convention drafters.

Of course, the problem of taking precaution as a principle is that it is never-ending. Why ban just these 12 almost defunct POPs? Many other POPs (there are hundreds in use) could cause 'harm' to humans, since they kill rats at high doses. The Samoan delegate even suggested two more that should be added. But no one was really pressing for further listings because the aim of the process was readily apparent. It was to get textual agreement which would speed the convention to become law. Listing useful POPs would delay the process, leading to discussions of expensive process and product changes, and potentially encouraging dangerous debate about the need for the Convention. Currently useful chemicals, such as the pesticide methyl bromide, can be listed once the convention has the weight of law behind it. At that time, veto or non-compliance will be illegal, and the only debate will be over whether new POPs should be listed.

In short the current Convention will protect us from chemicals which don't really cause any harm and that no one uses anymore, except for DDT (and PCBs in electronic devices in developing countries). Only later additions will actually have a noticeable effect on economic development.

Globe-trotting bureaucrats – and earth-bound citizens

But once ratification of the Convention begins it will spawn another global bureaucracy to go along with climate change, ozone depletion, endangered species, and numerous other convention secretariats. Besides the administrators, POPs bans will require considerable policing. One can see a future of blue beret POPs cops curtailing violations, perhaps from a factory in Vietnam, in the name of planet earth, with all the participants in the circus benefiting. The developing-country bureaucrats will gain kudos by overseeing implementation and administering foreign government donations. The Greens will be happy as they can return to their supporters (ranging from the Dutch Government to the man in the street) and show how they are saving the planet. Intergovernmental organisations such as FAO and WHO are happy because they can apply their expertise to the growing POPs 'problem', and hence increase their budgets and power.

And it's the citizens who lose

The only losers from this UN process will be consumers and taxpayers, deprived of products and paying for the privilege, and maybe the odd million who just might die from malaria if DDT actually doesn't make it into the exemptions list.

As I left the meeting for the last time I realised that I was wearing the same jacket as the representative from Senegal. We smiled at each other and I began to feel like I fitted in. After all it is intellectually stimulating debating the intricate detail of an interesting legal convention. I look forward to the next few meetings (INC5 is scheduled for South Africa in December 2000, where it's sure to be warmer than in Geneva) where we can trade tips on tailors, and the latest scientific speculation about POPs, perhaps over a nice bottle of *vin rouge*. To assuage my guilt at least I will not be there courtesy of UK taxpayers, although that can't necessarily be said for the guy from Senegal.

Further reading

Bate R (1998) *Fearing food: Risk, health and environment*, Butterworth, Heinemann.

Tren R (2000) *Malaria and the environmentalists*, Briefing Paper 47, Free Market Foundation, Johannesburg.

Reekie WD (2000) *Debacle in Seattle: Why free trade matters*, Briefing Paper 49, Free Market Foundation, Johannesburg.

This Briefing Paper was written by Roger Bate, Director of the science charity, the European Science and Environment Forum, Cambridge.