

A HUMAN ENVIRONMENT OMBUDSMAN

a statement of the
Union of International Associations
to the Preparatory Committee
for the United Nations Conference
on the Human Environment,
Stockholm, 1972.

1. New threats to the human environment will be identified each year as the global civilization becomes increasingly more complex.

2. It is characteristic of multi-disciplinary human environment problems that it is difficult to predict what domain such new threats will arise in, and therefore to decide in advance which agency should be responsible for any action. Problems are turned into crises if adequate responses cannot be rapidly organized. « What finally makes all of our crises still more dangerous is that they are now coming on top of each other. Most administrations are not prepared to deal with multiple crises, a crisis of crises, at one time. Every problem may escalate because those involved no longer have time to think straight. »

(John R. Platt. « What we must do ». Science, November, 1969)

3. In order to equip itself to respond to complex *unpredictable* crises, society needs to make full use of *all* the organizational resources at its disposal and willing to contribute in some way.

4. Specific recognition therefore needs to be given to the function of national and international *non-governmental* bodies and pressures groups as « look-out » institutions which, through their specialized interest and sensitivity :

— identify *new* threats to the human environment at an early stage;

— mobilize support to draw public attention to the nature of each new threat;

— encourage governments to take legislative action to counteract the threats to the environment;

— help to generate the political will without which governments cannot act;

— support government agencies by providing a pool of experts to monitor the problems and steps toward its solution, and to advise on legislation;

— supply a non-political forum in which the problem can be discussed before it is handled between governments in a political setting.

5. These are all aspects of the democratic process which are relevant to the rapid solution of human environment problems. The speed and effectiveness with which society can respond to crises is highly dependent on the effectiveness of the information system. An exclusive information system restricted or oriented toward the *current* responsibilities and interests of a limited sector of society, even if highly significant, as in the case of inter-

governmental social and political communication mechanisms to *restructure* itself to carry out the functions identified in point 4 above, with respect to *new* problems.

— does not facilitate the ability of government to interact with the non-governmental sector to obtain advice on and support for action in response to human environment problems.

— encourages non-governmental groups to set up their own independent communications networks and information centers, leading naturally to a dissipation of effort and competition for limited resources, lack of coordination and reduction of overall effectiveness.

6. A further aspect of the human environment problem is the increasing alienation of the individual in the urban environment, who is faced with the maze of « faceless » organizations perceived as increasingly invading his privacy.

The creation of exclusive governmental information systems which ignore the need of the individual and his groups to be able to use an information system to make and maintain contacts to further his interests, serves in many ways clearly to :

— aggravate the problem of alienation

— increase the problem of the governments to create the « political will to change »;

— increase the « credibility gap » and suspicion inherent in individual perception of distant government programmes.

7. To prepare for unpredictable problems, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in considering the communications and information processing system which would be most appropriate for the coming decade, should study :

a. Means of guaranteeing the interaction between governmental and non-governmental users through the system — even when a given problem recognized by a non-governmental body is *not* currently recognized by a government or governmental agency.

b. Means of guaranteeing the interaction between non-governmental users through the system (independently of a governmental agency's current judgement of the value of a particular interaction) in order that non-government bodies should be able to initiate rapidly new links and patterns of interaction themselves in response to any new problem, or in response to a call for support by a governmental agency.

c. Means of guaranteeing the interaction between individuals through the system so that active individuals or bodies, anxious to contribute significantly, can detect (a) bodies or programmes

Environmental Conference by Barbara Ward, but the NGO representatives who signed the Manifesto did so in their individual capacities only. The care which was taken in presenting the Environmental Manifesto to the UN Conference to make clear that the organizational affiliations of the signers were listed « for identification only » could not help but have weakened the impact of the document.

In order to facilitate more effective NGO participation in the future work of the proposed UN Environmental Secretariat the NGO representatives attending the Stockholm Conference began meeting among themselves to discuss how they might increase their cooperation and effectiveness. By and large these NGO meetings were exercises in futility. Representatives of scientific and professional NGO's tended to see things differently from those of long-standing conservation oriented NGO's, while the representatives of citizen action type NGO's tended to see things still another way. Disagreements arising from these differences among the NGO's were compounded by such things as the industrial or non-industrial status of the NGO representatives' home countries and the languages used by the participants in the NGO meetings (simultaneous translation services were not available in the NGO meetings). When it came time to consider the establishment of some sort of NGO liaison committee for environmental affairs it became evident that few were willing to provide much financial support for this, and fewer still were willing to grant any such coordinating organization the right to speak or act in the name of all NGO's without the unanimous approval of the member NGO's beforehand. As few if any of the NGO representatives attending these meetings were authorized to commit their organizations to the establishment of any kind of coordinating machinery anyway, the matter was deferred for further consideration to a future NGO conference.

The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment was an ambitious first attempt to come to grips with environmental problems on a global level. It is not surprising therefore that the results achieved by both the governments and the NGO's in Stockholm were less dramatic and concrete than had been hoped by many. The level of disappointment felt by people concerned with the state of the global environment may have been greater for the results achieved by the NGO's than those achieved by the governments because of the many advantages NGO representatives would seem to have over instructed governmental delegates. It is difficult to avoid profound discouragement when those people in world society who should be in the best position to criticize governments for their inaction and to spur them on toward efforts at problem-solving seem themselves to suffer from the same syndrome of petty jealousies and vested interests which has traditionally afflicted the inter-governmental sector of world society.

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(communication permanente)

(governmental) or non-governmental) in which they can participate, (b) problem areas for which individuals or bodies with matching interests could group together and create some new body to further their interest, (c) individuals interested in working together on a particular problem area.

d. Means of guaranteeing that when the connection between apparently unrelated problem areas is discovered, this link is incorporated into the information system, so that users interested in one problem area will be automatically exposed to the complete list of problems known to be related to the one which primarily interests them.

e. Means of decentralizing the information system to provide a network of input and output centers at regional, national, and city level to insure that funds for the system can be sought at the level at which they will be most frequently spent, whilst at the same time guaranteeing the circulation of information vertically to the regional and international level, and horizontally to other bodies in other areas.

8. The increasing multidisciplinary interest in the human environment counterbalances many of the excesses of economic development — which was narrowly conceived as the major key to world problems. The Human Environment Conference will be counterproductive to the extent that human environment programmes are, in their turn, narrowly conceived as the panacea, which, it is hoped, would give a new lease on life to economic development programmes. The as-yet ill defined social organizational and problem context of governmental human environment concerns could, if ignored, undermine effective response on environmental issues — as happened with respect to development issues.

Human environment problems need to be seen as intimately related to social development, which itself needs to be reconceptualized as distinct from its current definition as the development of human resources for the benefit of economic development.

9. In order to improve communication and action throughout the network of governmental and non-governmental agencies with respect to multidisciplinary human environment problems, the Conference could consider the feasibility of creating the Office of « Human Environment Ombudsman ». This Office would act as an independent international clearing house for comments from all sources on human environment problems (or administrative circumstances preventing their rapid solution), particularly those arising from the uncoordinated interaction of different agency programmes. Such an Office would be responsible for informing agencies and governments of aspects of agency programme content or procedures likely to have unwelcome side-effects which could neither be detected by the disciplines represented within the agency nor be considered relevant in terms of the agency's mandate.

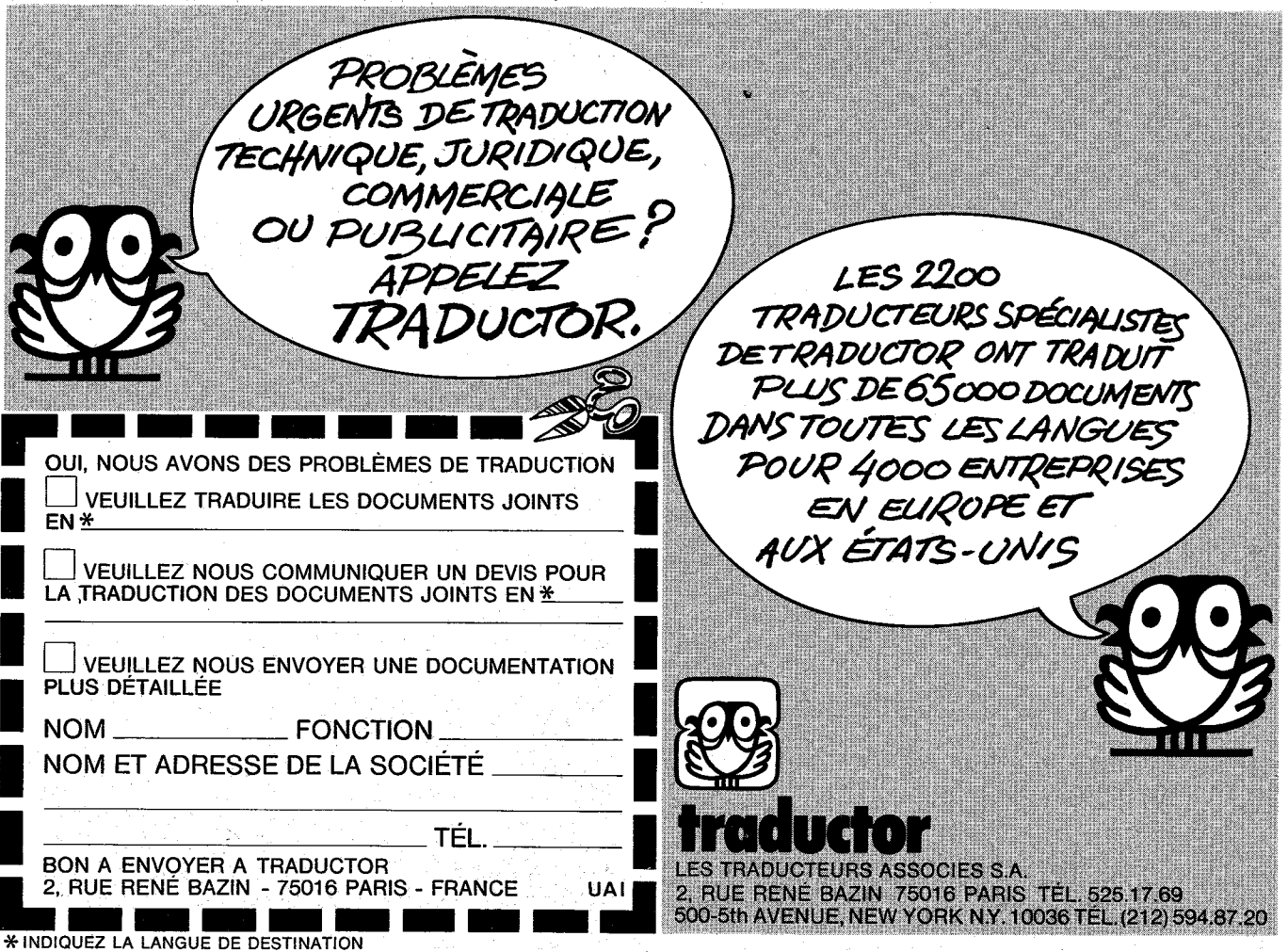
The existence of such an Office could guarantee that :

a. there would be an open line of communication to all bodies likely to encounter or identify new human environment problems (The Office could function as a focal point within the international organizational network with which the many young environment activist groups could interact and to which they could feed information);

b. emerging and previously identified problems are rapidly registered and drawn to the attention of the most relevant agencies;

c. pollution and conservation issues do not pre-empt attention from the broader human environment issues. The perspective required should retrieve social development from its current obfuscation by economic development priorities.

The precise limits of the responsibility of the Human Environment Ombudsman would need to be defined to fill any gap between conservation agencies, human rights commissions, and development-oriented agencies. The Office could in fact act as a referral centre for queries outside its mandate, particularly if its existence was widely known as a result of adequate public information programmes.



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