

# Introduction

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The concept of sustainable development played a central role in the first book of this series on environmental policy in an international context: *Perspectives on Environmental Problems* (Glasbergen and Blowers, 1995). It did play that role because of its capacity to integrate the natural with the social. First, it recognises the natural limits imposed by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. Second, it underlines the threat to environmental resources created by the present state of technology and social organisation. In other words, the term 'sustainable development' suggests a desire to ensure that social developments are compatible with the needs of the environment. As Opschoor and Van der Ploeg argue (1990, p.102), the environmental capital must not be allowed to depreciate. Natural resources are not only a source of human prosperity, they are also essential to the survival of the human race. As long as some specific conditions are met, natural resources should be able to continue to perform this function.

Firstly, the rate at which *renewable* resources are used should not be greater than the rate at which they are replenished. Secondly, the rate at which *non-renewable* resources are used should not be greater than the rate at which alternative, renewable resources are developed. It seems feasible to satisfy these conditions for an international community which feels a need to treat its natural environment in a sensible manner, particularly since it is clearly in its own interests to do so. After all, the bottom line is the preservation of the very conditions that enable us to live.

The day-to-day political reality is, however, rather different. In many cases, people simply fail to realise (or choose not to realise) that some of their actions are solely in their own interest and not in the interest of our common environment. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is a very close link between environmental problems and conflicts of interest. One of the main conclusions drawn in the first book of this series reflects this very situation: 'Sustainable development should be seen in terms of development and distribution problems that involve conflicts of interest' (Blowers

and Glasbergen, 1995). Various types of conflict of interest were discussed in this connection, e.g. between short-term and long-term interests, between the interests of the present generation and the potential interests of future generations, between rich and poor, between North and South, East and West and (on a more abstract level) between the environment and the economy. It should be said, however, that many of these conflicts of interest were only mentioned in passing, i.e. in the course of analyses of environmental problems each of which started out from a highly specific perspective. As a result, a fairly diffuse picture of the significance of conflicts of interest was presented and reference was made to totally different phenomena at different levels of abstraction.

An exception, perhaps, was Potter's contribution (Potter, 1995), which linked conflicts of interest not just with environmental problems but also with environmental policy. He claimed that environmental policy always works in favour of certain interests at the expense of others. In his view, the best means of illustrating the conflicting interests is by asking the following questions: Who benefits? In whose interest is a particular environmental policy? This first attempt at a more systematic analysis of the conflicts of interest surrounding the definition and potential solution of international environmental problems forms the basis for further analysis in the present book. The great complexity of the issues involved is reflected in the following questions, which will be discussed below:

- How can one identify conflicts of interest?
- In what light should conflicts of interest be seen?
- In what way are the conflicts of interest tending to change?
- How can one classify conflicts of interest?
- How far are conflicts of interest manageable?

The discussions take the form of tentative answers. They are based on viewpoints which may be described as the prescientific intuitions to which we readily adhere. As we study the answers closer, however, they'll prove to be in need of adjustment. From the discussions, then, a description arises of the structure of the present book in the series on environmental policy in an international context.

## **How can one identify conflicts of interests?**

The term *conflict of interests* tends to suggest the presence of two or more parties who are engaged in active, open combat. Yet not all such clashes actually express themselves in the form of conflicts; conflicts of interest may occur without there actually being any evidence of conflictive behaviour. This is the case, for example, where a researcher concludes that the interests of the parties involved in a given environmental issue are at odds with each other and are thus theoretically conflicting. In other words, conflicts of interest may be *manifest*, with the parties concerned displaying some form of 'destructive' behaviour, in the sense that each tries to undermine the other's position to a greater or lesser degree. Equally, conflicts of interest may also be *latent*, with the parties concerned refraining, at least temporarily, from active, open conflict. In the latter case, the parties may or may not themselves experience the conflict of interests as an actual conflict.

As far as environmental problems are concerned, both types of conflict occur. Manifest environmental conflicts may arise, for example, over the control of certain natural resources such as water, fertile soil or fish stocks. The Gulf War is a good example of a very serious conflict in which the struggle for the control of a natural resource (oil) played a key role. If we examine crises such as these, we can gain a clear idea of the precise interests which are at work and the consequences this may have. Other conflicts may be of a less cataclysmic nature, e.g. the disagreements which have arisen between the countries of the Northern and Southern hemispheres during the international climate talks. Nevertheless, they are manifest and an analysis of the conflicts of interest may help to understand the social implications of global warming.

Interestingly, the conflicts of interest which have arisen as a consequence of the desire to achieve sustainable development should be regarded more as the results of an analysis. The process of change which this desire involves is likely to lead to certain vested interests being undermined, certain established rights being restricted and traditional property rights being questioned. To some extent, these effects are already visible. However, it is researchers who are trying to quantify the implications of the term 'sustainable development'. In doing so, they also try to identify latent conflicts of interest and to determine how they can best be avoided, precisely in order to prevent the occurrence of a destructive conflict.

## **In what light should conflicts of interest be seen?**

Conflicts of interest are generally cast in a poor light. It is not clear, however, whether this is entirely justified. After all, conflicts of interest can just as easily be seen as a general feature of human activity, i.e. as inherent to human life. This is in itself a good reason for not instantly associating them with bad news. Social scientific studies intended actively to encourage certain population groups to become more aware of their own interests in order to improve their social standing reflect particularly clearly how conflicts are part and parcel of human life. Some Marxist literature and the feminist approach to scientific thought are both good examples of this. Researchers working in these schools base their work on an explicit value judgement, i.e. the consideration that certain interests are not recognised and certain groups are not sufficiently organised, with the effect that social inequality is sustained. However, even where there is less direct evidence of a normative perspective, one may still conclude that conflicts of interest may be productive vehicles of social change. In fact, one could even argue that positive social change is not possible without some form of social conflict.

One could, in this connection, compare the development of environmental issues with that of social issues at the beginning of the century (Bressers, 1992). It was at that time that a new form of social ethics began to develop, in the West in particular, which had the effect of altering the current ethics surrounding social conduct. However, the establishment of organised trade unions and progressive political parties was needed before the new ethics could be translated into new social legislation.

The scale of the challenge which society is now facing as a result of environmental problems is of more or less the same order. Today's environmental problems also

require us to adopt a new attitude (and hence a different type of conduct) towards the way in which we provide for ourselves. Here, too, it is likely that the forces of change will have to organise themselves. The environmental movement is already playing a pioneering role to an increasing extent, together with non-governmental organisations which are concerned with the problems of developing countries, as well as with certain political groupings. It is reasonable to assume that, as the quality of the environment progressively deteriorates, we shall see ever closer co-operation between such environmental activists and political parties. The conflicts which will ensue may be an incentive for international action, thereby taking us a further step forward in the continuous process of formulating interests which need protection. This is the case, for example, where a conflict is institutionalised, i.e. talks are held, negotiations conducted and conflicts regulated by certain bodies established specially for this purpose. Within the field of international environmental protection, a first, albeit hesitant step has recently been taken in this direction.

## **In what way are the conflicts of interest tending to change?**

The term 'conflict of interest' is often readily associated with clearly definable *material interests*. Here, too, the conflicts surrounding environmental problems are somewhat at variance with the usual picture. This is largely a result of the shift which has taken place in the nature of environmental problems and in the way in which they are viewed by society. For example, there has been a dramatic change in the nature of environmental pollution over the past few decades. At the beginning of the 1970s, when modern environmental policy was still in its infancy, people tended to regard environmental issues as problems of a general hygienic nature which posed a threat to human health and which could be solved with the aid of modern technology.

We now know, however, that high concentrations of toxic emissions produced by large-scale polluters no longer constitute the most important problem facing us, at least not in the industrialised countries. As far as these are concerned, it is fairly easy to identify the interests involved and hence to take action to reduce the threat. The key problem today is rather that of controlling all the diffuse, mobile sources of pollution (such as traffic) which emit low concentrations of a wide range of substances, many of which are not immediately harmful. Pollution is tending to be spread over a much wider area, to accumulate and to affect the quality of environmental 'stocks', e.g. the ozone layer, the atmosphere, the soil, the oceans, the rivers and the ground water.

A secondary complication is the increase there has been in the scale of environmental problems. Alongside local and regional environmental problems, we are now faced with cross-border problems and even issues on a global scale.

Thirdly, because of the changes in the nature and scale of environmental problems, the time span of cause, effect and (where feasible) recovery has been greatly extended, thereby increasing the degree of scientific uncertainty (Verbruggen, 1995, pp.3-4). A further factor which could also be cited is the intensive use that is now made of the land, which has resulted in a decline in biodiversity. In the developing countries this has

become a particularly desperate problem. It is a problem which is caused by a low, rather than a high, standard of living and is now also regarded as having a global dimension.

As a result of all these various developments, environmental policy has undergone a sea change, reflected in a switch in thinking away from a hygienic perspective (in which environmental problems are perceived primarily as a threat to public health) towards the adoption of a framework based on the conditions which need to be met in order to ensure the survival of ecosystems. According to current thinking, there is only a limited role for technology to perform in solving environmental problems. The central theme now is the need for a change in the attitudes and habits of producers and consumers (see also Weale, 1992).

As a result of these trends, we have also seen a change in the pattern of interests surrounding environmental issues. First of all, it has broadened. As environmental problems have crossed (national) borders, so there has also been a concomitant increase in the variety of interests involved. In addition, the interests themselves have grown more diffuse. It is becoming increasingly difficult, for example, to decide which interests benefit and which interests suffer from particular methods of dealing with environmental problems which are themselves clouded in uncertainty. As a consequence of scientific uncertainty, procrastination and the protection of interests are likely to occur while long-term fundamental threats are mounting. Particularly where global environmental problems are concerned, the arguments in favour of certain solutions are often based on an assessment of the potential risks and the degree of irreparable damage which may possibly be caused in the future. There are very few material interests which are either served or damaged as a direct result of such action.

Finally, it should also be pointed out that immaterial interests have also begun to feature more prominently. Some of the arguments used today, for example, claim that the intrinsic value of Nature and the uniqueness of certain ecosystems are in themselves sufficient grounds for protective action.

## **How can one classify conflicts of interest?**

The next question is linked to our tendency to think in terms of simple categories and often even in terms of dichotomies. I referred to a number of these at the beginning of this introduction: short-term interests as opposed to long-term interests, present versus future generations, rich and poor, etc. In the previous section, we talked about local, regional, cross-border and global environmental problems. Because such classifications present the complex reality in easily understandable chunks, they may help us to build up a theoretical insight. At the same time, they are often such oversimplifications of the social reality that they ignore certain essential aspects. In other words, these types of classification may in fact tend to conceal the truth. In any event, they are virtually always contestable. Take, for example, the supposed conflict between the environment and the economy to which experts frequently refer. Economists are not in agreement about the resolution of the problem. Some claim that economic growth is needed in order to enable environmental problems to be tackled. Others, on the other hand, point to the need for a slowdown in economic expansion. Others again argue that the presence or otherwise of economic growth is a total irrelevance.

As a second example, how about the supposed North–South dichotomy? The relationship between the two hemispheres involves a number of highly complex interdependencies that are by no means always unidirectional. In economic terms, many Southern states may be said to be dependent on Northern states and yet in practical terms this is not always the case. Economic growth in rapidly developing countries has been achieved through the development of low cost production in industries like textiles, once the preserve of the North. This has resulted in a painful process of restructuring in the North. This sort of pressure is likely to become even more intense in the future.

In political terms, the situation is again different. Is it not true that the prosperity of the North depends, *inter alia*, on the political stability of and democratic progress in the Southern states? There are also various complex interdependencies in evidence if one looks at the situation from a cultural viewpoint. This means, for example, that different cultures may view the same phenomena (such as environmental issues) in an entirely different light and that the same phenomena will therefore have a totally different impact on societal behaviour in different cultures (see Liberatore, 1995).

We also need to give special thought to the popular system of classifying environmental problems on a spatial basis. This is often deceptively convenient, particularly if it implies that a problem which can be described in certain spatial terms also needs to be resolved within the same framework. This applies, for example, where it is suggested that a so-called ‘local’ environmental problem needs only to be tackled on a local level and that a ‘global’ problem basically needs a global solution. In fact, problems that may appear at first sight to be local are often of a completely different nature. Even if the adverse environmental impact manifests itself on a small scale, it may nevertheless be the case that the roots of the problem are actually far removed from the same scale. To give an example, the environmental pollution which is caused by intensive agricultural production in The Netherlands is closely linked with international agricultural policies. Here, the solution of a local problem requires action on an international level that even goes beyond the confines of environmental policy. Similarly, a series of minor, local sources of pollution may give rise to an international environmental problem. This is not simply due to the fact that there may be a cumulative adverse environmental impact. In many cases, local action is possible only once certain steps have been taken to safeguard the competitive balance of international business relations. By the same token, many issues which are perceived to be global problems are in fact essentially local or regional problems. The felling of tropical rainforests, for example, causes tremendous problems in the vicinity of the forests. Equally, any restrictions which are placed on the trade in tropical hardwood have an intense local impact. And yet the issue is neatly compartmentalised as the global problem of a decline in biodiversity.

Other global environmental problems, such as the depletion of the ozone layer and the phenomenon of global warming, require action which may have completely different effects from region to region and which therefore tends to differ from region to region. For this reason, it is actually wrong to try and determine, as many people tend to do, the optimum scale on which policy action should be taken to counteract a particular environmental problem. Many environmental problems need concurrent forms of interrelated action on differing spatial scales.

## **How far are conflicts of interest manageable?**

Finally, we are often at pains to translate cause and effect relationships affecting environmental problems into conflicts of interest involving an 'offender' on the one hand and a 'victim' on the other. In this scenario, the 'offenders' are those who are responsible for the problem in question and who need to change their behaviour accordingly. In many cases, however, the situation is not as simple as this suggests. The chief reason for this is that, in certain respects, environmental conflicts are highly specific social clashes (Glasbergen, 1995, p.6). What we see is that, although there is often a broad acceptance of environmental policy aims at an abstract level, it is difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to follow this through to its logical conclusion and actually adapt one's behaviour in the manner which is needed.

There is a broad consensus as to the direction in which the necessary process of environmental renewal should proceed, i.e. that of sustainable development. There are no social forces urging us to step up the level of pollution, to quicken the speed at which the supply of natural resources is being depleted and to launch fiercer attacks on flora and fauna. To this extent, the term 'sustainable development' has the same force and appeal as words like 'freedom' and 'equality'. Everyone is in favour and it is not until words need to be turned into action that certain conflicts of interest emerge.

Yet there is one essential difference. There is no one – with the obvious exception of criminal elements who are intent, for example, on making money from the trade in contaminated waste and who know what environmental impact their activities have – who may be said to be seeking deliberately to cause environmental problems. Farmers are not in business to raise the levels of soil acidity. Traders do not operate for the sole purpose of jeopardising public health. Indeed, many farmers and traders will claim that they support the aims of nature conservationists. In other words, the social activities which lead to environmental problems do not stem from a desire to damage the environment. In fact, virtually all conflicts of interest come into being around social activities which are regarded as being beneficial from a non-environmental viewpoint. Agricultural and industrial production and personal mobility are examples of such activities. There is no sense in which their very existence and purpose have been called into question. What is at issue is their adverse environmental impact.

Who, then, are the offenders and the victims here? This question can be answered in different ways. We could, for example, hold individual farmers and traders responsible for the pollution which they produce. But are they not more or less obliged to do so in order to stay ahead of the competition? We could also designate the agricultural and industrial sectors as a whole as the 'offenders', with the general population taking on the role of innocent 'victims'. But are we not all consumers of agricultural produce and users of industrial products? A third possible answer is that we are all both offenders and victims alike.

It would seem that we are trapped like prisoners in social systems which force us to act in a manner which causes effects we have no desire to cause. Or is this just an easy way of renouncing our responsibility and ignoring the ethical and normative aspects of our own role? If, however, we do attempt to take account of the ethical side, we find that there are differences in the degree to which different actors may be expected to initiate change.

In countries with a high standard of living, for example, there are in theory plenty of opportunities for changing production and consumption processes. In many of the poorest countries, on the other hand, where intensive use of the soil has sparked off a process of desertification, there are simply no alternatives available. The people in such countries are both offenders and victims at one and the same time and environmental degradation there is the result of a situation of *force majeure*. For this reason, it is reasonable to expect the richest countries not only to take the lead in instituting a process of environmental regeneration, but also to help solve the desperate situations in which other countries may find themselves. In fact, this brings us back to one of the key arguments presented in the first book of this series: the only way of solving environmental problems is by learning to regard them as international development and wealth distribution issues. It requires us to think of alternatives for the ways in which we currently provide for ourselves, based on the assumption that there must be other ways of securing a reasonable standard of living. In short, the issue is primarily a political one.

## **The structure of the present book in the *Environmental Policy in an International Context* series**

The above is no more than the opening speech in the debate which we should like to initiate in this book. The key question is '*What are the causes of international environmental problems and what are the conflicts surrounding their definition and potential solution?*' I have tried to make clear that, by choosing to study environmental problems as conflicts of interest, we have adopted a perspective which can further our understanding of the issues introduced in the first book. Conflicts of interest represent major concerns of the parties involved in international environmental issues. By studying these, we can build up a clearer picture of current preoccupations. We have decided to do this in this book by means of *problem-oriented case studies*.

The logic of the case studies is that they generally work from the local to the global in terms of the type and scale of the problems addressed. Chapters 1 and 2 begin by examining local environmental problems in Western Europe, i.e. problems whose impact is confined basically to one single country. Despite this, it is in international political and economic structures and relationships that we can find both their causes and their solutions. Bolsius and Frouws (Chapter 1) look at the ostensibly local problem of environmental pollution caused by intensive agriculture as practised in The Netherlands. A closer analysis reveals, however, that there is a clear international dimension to the problem. Blunden and Curry (Chapter 2) then demonstrate that conflicts of interest of different types are played out at different levels, including internationally, in respect of the protection of the Broadland area in the UK. Local policy is shown to be greatly affected by international conventions.

Chapters 3 and 4 address environmental problems in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Southern hemisphere respectively. Tellegen (Chapter 3) discusses the transition from an authoritarian, planned economy to a democratic, market economy,

which has given rise to new forms of conflicts of interest in relation to environmental problems. They are particularly complex in that some of them are bound up with ethnic conflicts. Sage (Chapter 4) argues that, contrary to popular belief, there is no simple causal relationship between population growth, poverty and environmental degradation in the South. The pattern is more complex than that. It is possible to identify a range of conflicts of interest whose impact is felt way beyond the limits of the South.

Chapter 5 deals with a regional issue while the remaining three chapters focus on global issues. Van der Straaten (Chapter 5) looks at the problem of acid rain and centres on the cross-border effects of this environmental problem, showing how cause-effect and cost-benefit relationships can affect the way in which the problem is tackled. Expressing the problem in economic terms is a process that is clouded in ambiguity.

Global environmental problems provide the theme for the final three chapters of the book. Blowers (Chapter 6) establishes various links between conflicts over waste disposal and the politics of power. The hierarchical relationships which are seen to be at work in connection with hazardous waste are not the same as those which are involved in the disposal of nuclear waste. For this reason, the management issues also differ. Van Beukering and Vellinga (Chapter 7) discuss the question of global warming, with all its attendant uncertainties. These have not, however, stifled recent attempts to bridge a number of international gaps created by conflicts of interest. Barnes (Chapter 8) demonstrates, with reference to the problem of the decline in biodiversity, that environmental problems are frequently closely linked to social problems. This makes them difficult to quantify. There are also both national and international factors at work which have an impact on such problems. The question is whether it is possible to find an effective means of dealing with them.

The case studies have both an internal rationale and a rationale in the context of the book as a whole. Their internal rationale is that they each represent a major environmental issue in an international context. Together, they cover a broad policy spectrum. Their rationale in the context of the book as a whole lies in their link with conflicts of interest. The case studies in question have been chosen with the specific aim of inviting the reader to give further thought to the points which have been raised in this Introduction and to formulate his or her own point of view on them. In doing so, I have tried to clarify two other abstract views which transcend the specific points at issue here. The first is that conflicts of interest have both local and global implications in relation to policy. The second is that any resolution of such conflicts must be related to the social context of the problems. For this reason, the analysis of each case includes international policy and management issues.