

4

Environmental problems in their political context

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4.1 Introduction

Environmental problems have ‘physical’ properties addressed by the natural sciences, and they are shaped by social processes within an international context. These important ideas are elaborated in the first three chapters of this book. Environmental problems also have a political context, another important consideration that has been referred to earlier. In Chapter 1, for example, there is reference to the political difficulties of solving environmental problems through international decision-making processes dominated by ‘sovereign’ states. Of course there is more to the ‘political’ than decision making, as will rapidly become clear in this chapter.

Two main questions are addressed in this chapter. The first is: ‘What are the main features of the international political context of an environmental problem?’ This is a complex question, not least because to answer it requires making clear the meanings of a number of rather abstract concepts like ‘political’ and ‘power’. For this reason, the chapter starts with an example of one environmental problem (section 4.2) which is then used to illustrate the general discussion about main features of the international political context (4.3). We then move on to other examples of environmental problems and their varying and changing political contexts (4.4). The second main question considered in this chapter is: ‘What is the significance of the “sovereign” state in relation to environmental problems?’ In this context we discuss the theory of sovereignty and look at the state as one of the most important environmental change agents (4.5).

4.2 An environmental problem at Lake Toba

An environmental problem is defined in Chapter 2 as a change in the physical environment brought about by human interferences which are perceived by people to

be unacceptable with respect to a particular set of commonly shared norms. What has happened at Lake Toba since 1989 is an example of the development of an environmental problem.

Lake Toba is in North Sumatra (Indonesia), an area known for the rich cultural life of the local Batak people and the great natural beauty of the surrounding countryside and its forests. Since 1989 the area has changed in at least four main ways. (What follows in this section is based on WALHI, 1992.)

First, tropical forests have been degraded or destroyed. Ageing stands of indigenous *Pinus merkusii* (planted during the Dutch colonial period) and mixed hardwoods have been logged extensively. In some cases, the forest has been clear-cut and replaced by fast-growing eucalyptus plantations intended to supply wood for the pulp and paper industry. The former Hariamboho Protection Forest near Lake Toba consisting of old-growth trees and a rich biodiversity has been divided by a logging road; on one side are lush natural forests full of animal and plant life and on the other side is a dry, silent eucalyptus plantation. The microclimate has already begun to change; particularly around the plantation, the air and soil are becoming noticeably drier, increasing the area's vulnerability to forest fires.

Second, landslides are becoming more common. The watershed around Lake Toba is mountainous and erosion-prone; the forests are extremely important in preventing siltation in the lake and checking erosion in the mountains. Since 1989, landslides have increased with deforestation. Villages and ricefields have been buried and people killed. On the advice of forestry officials, Batak people in some villages have moved from the traditional multiple-family homes to single-family houses in the Javanese style, and in so doing have had their community life disrupted or destroyed.

Third, the water and the air in the region have become polluted. The colour of the River Asahan began to change in 1989 to dark brown, and the river began to stink due to a pulp and paper factory having commenced operations there. One consequence has been that nearby wells have been polluted, and women and children in the area have had to travel further from their homes to obtain drinking water. Fish populations have declined sharply, threatening livelihoods. Officials in the factory have expressed concern that the stench so nauseates their employees that it affects their work.

Fourth, livelihoods of the local people more generally have been adversely affected. New laws enabled logging companies to 'own' former community forests, as on Samosir Island; local people were then forbidden to enter the forests and wood carvers found they had to 'steal' from 'their' former forest to keep up their traditional craft and means of existence. Basic family needs in Hutagalung village were threatened because the rattan (stems of climbing palms used to make wickerwork, thongs, etc.) culled from the nearby forest by women and then sold in local markets was no longer available. People in Habinsaran village who used to gather incense from the community forest were no longer able to do so.

Clearly, then, this is an example of a developing environmental problem in the sense that there were human interferences in the physical environment perceived by local communities as disrupting commonly shared norms related to work patterns and livelihoods more generally.

What was causing the problem? For the local Batak people what was most visibly disrupting their livelihoods were the men who were cutting down the forests and

planting eucalyptus trees. These people worked for a local commercial pulp and paper company called the Perseroan Terbatas Inti Indorayon Utama Ltd or Indorayon for short. Indorayon was one of 30 such companies owned by the Raja Garuda Mas Group chaired by Sukanto Tanoto, the 'timber king' of Sumatra. Tanoto had rapidly made a fortune through his companies. In 1989 Indorayon alone made profits of \$53.6 million; this was helped by the fact that production costs at \$226 per ton of pulp were the lowest in the world. International bankers and investors had supported Indorayon from the beginning; a consortium of foreign banks provided commercial loans to aid the original investment and the Swiss Bank Corporation in 1992 approved the issue of convertible bonds worth \$43.4 million to provide the finance needed to build Indorayon's pulp and rayon plant on the Asahan River near Lake Toba. Tanoto benefited; so did the banks.

People in the Forest Department and other government officials in the Lake Toba area broadly supported the activities of Indorayon. Such commercial activity was consistent with the broad strategy of the Indonesian government to pursue development for the country principally by providing infrastructure to enable the dynamism of capitalist enterprises like Indorayon to flourish. The results of this strategy prior to developments at Lake Toba had been impressive from the government's point of view.



Plate 4.1 Lake Toba, Sumatra, Indonesia. Photo: Randy Topp/Lineair

The average annual growth in Indonesia between 1965 and 1988 had been 4.3% (GNP per capita), one of the highest rates in the world at the time (World Bank, 1990). One aspect of that strategy had been to invite private concessionaires, both domestic and foreign, to 'open up' the forests in 1965. Basic Forestry Law No. 5 of 1967 created vast logging concessions and the concessionaires moved in. By 1979 Indonesia had become the leading exporter of tropical logs in the world, with 41% of the market. Logs were also processed into plywood; by 1985 Indonesia was the world's largest supplier of plywood. The forest business attracted international capital needed to spearhead Indonesian development in other spheres. It also provided foreign exchange to service the mounting debt owed to international, commercial and official institutions. The government's national forestry plan was also linked and shaped by the Tropical Forestry Action Plan sponsored and funded by the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, bilateral donors including the British government, and others. In all this, the social problems of the indigenous people who had been making a living from the forest received a low priority.

Village people in the Lake Toba region protested to local government officials at the loss of their customary rights of access to the forest and its products, but received little response. They also managed at one point to take Indorayon to court, and, unsurprisingly, the court ruled against them. KSPPM (the Community Initiative Study and Development Group), a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), had worked with some of the local people trying to assist them in their struggle. KSPPM was one of hundreds of local NGOs in Indonesia linked to a national umbrella NGO in Jakarta called WALHI (Indonesia Forum for the Environment). WALHI in turn was linked to international NGOs like NOVIB in The Netherlands, Friends of the Earth (with international headquarters in Amsterdam), which worked to shift the forest policies of powerful organisations at international, national and local levels. Local NGOs in Indonesia have had a tough time against a powerful corporation supported by an authoritarian political regime. KSPPM at Lake Toba, for example, was closed down without explanation by the Indonesian government for six months in 1991 and 1992 and was only allowed to resume its activities on condition that it ended its legal aid programme to the local Batak people.

There are many other people involved in this story of the environmental problem at Lake Toba, some of whom are referred to later.

4.3 Main features of an international political context

What are the main features of the international political context of an environmental problem like the one at Lake Toba? Such features can be derived from a consideration of what the concepts 'international' and 'political' mean.

The word 'international' conventionally refers to engagements or interdependencies involving more than one nation state, at a level 'above' the nation state. The word is also used more generally to refer to both international and *transnational* interactions and associations. An international agreement is an agreement between nation states.

Transnational linkages can be said to bypass governments because they are society-to-society relations, many of which are more or less beyond nation state control. There is an incredible array of such transnational relations, from Shell Oil Company to the International Confederation of Free Trades Unions, the World Council of Churches and the International Red Cross. Some people are beginning to refer to a global politics (McGrew et al., 1992) that includes both international and transnational behaviour. Environmental politics involves both.

There is an ambiguity in the idea of the international context being 'above' the nation state. International contexts of environmental problems include the international/transnational, the national and the local *and the linkages between these different levels*. The environmental problem at Lake Toba brought this out clearly. International processes can also have a spatial dimension; they can press down more or less firmly on different localities at different times.

The key concept in the main question is 'political'. How one uses the concept is of paramount importance in determining what the 'main features' are. Although there is no agreed definition, one can say that, broadly speaking, the political aspect of social life is grounded in the antagonisms and conflicts that are more or less part of any set of social relations and it is about the ensemble of practices, structures, relationships and discourses which establish and maintain some sort of 'order' in such circumstances. Within that general context, for our purposes here, the word 'political' can be said to refer to four main aspects:

- *steering and choosing*
- such steering and choosing are determined more or less by *conflicting interests and values*
- they involve *power relations* within and between *agents*, such as organisations, groups and individuals
- and they are shaped by *structures of power* – economic, social, ideological, cultural.

Defining 'the political' that way suggests that a description of the international political context of an environmental problem can be framed in terms of these four main features. We consider each of these four in the following sections.

Steering and choosing

The international context of an environmental problem involves steering or governing. The word 'governing' comes originally from the old French *gouvernor* which is from the Latin *gubernare* (to steer, pilot, govern), which in turn derived from the Greek *Kybernan* or *kubernao* (which means 'to steer'). Plato, for example, referred to the process of governing as similar to steering a ship at sea ('the ship of state'). Steering a ship at sea requires a number of things, like trying to stay in control in the midst of turmoil, charting a course and trying to achieve an objective (reach a destination). All these are important aspects of political leadership and to that extent Plato's analogy is quite suggestive. But the people being led are missing from this elitist analogy (rather typical of Plato). We prefer the analogy that has been around in Asia for a long time, of the ruler or political leader being like a person trying to ride a tiger in a particular direction, the tiger being the more or less obedient masses who must be coaxed along

and who may, if goaded too hard, turn on the ruler and make big trouble. Steering the tiger involves a series of choices over time. If the tiger starts to become agitated, then the leader may choose to slow the pace for a while (e.g. delay action or amend legislation), let the tiger wander temporarily from its intended trajectory (e.g. compromise with the opposition), feed the tiger (e.g. bring out a 'people's budget' just before an election) or get out the whip (e.g. use the police and/or the army to force the people to accept the direction of the leadership). Steering processes are always part of the political context of any environmental problem.

There are always several different sets of organisations, each engaged in processes of steering in accordance with their interests and values, whose actions over time affect the environmental problem in various ways. Three such steering processes were indicated in the Lake Toba case sketched earlier. First, there was the network of institutions (the World Bank, the FAO, the Indonesian government, local government) engaged in trying to steer Indonesian society along a particular course of economic development, the consequences of which were affecting the forests and lifestyles of the Batak people at Lake Toba. Second, there was the network of Swiss Bank, Raja Garuda Mas, Indorayon, and loggers and pulp mill workers steering in accordance with their interests. Third, there was the Friends of the Earth International, WALHI, KSPPM, and local village people who were trying to steer developments in a somewhat different direction.

Steering involves a series of choices over time. Choosing is indeed central to steering. Any agent trying to steer in a certain direction, be it to maintain the status quo or to bring about change, is choosing all the time as it is swept along by the constraints and opportunities that confront it. To choose to steer in one direction inevitably means choosing not to steer in another, and those choices are political because they benefit some people more than others. A set of choices by an organisation, or a network of organisations and groups, over time amounts to a *policy*, defined here as a deliberate course of action by an organisation designed to achieve an objective. Identifying the political context of an environmental problem requires, amongst other things, trying to locate both the relevant agents whose actions or policies affect the problem and the constraints and opportunities that influence the policy choices made.

Conflicting interests and values

Politics is not just about processes of steering and choosing at different levels. The content of any particular environmental policy or course of action by an agent and its supporters usually entails a political project or purpose of some kind that expresses the values and interests and ideologies of those doing the steering, and that may or may not be shared by those being steered. The best way to get at the conflicting interests involved in any political context is to ask: who benefits? In whose interests is that particular environmental policy? Any course of action by a powerful agent that bears on an environmental problem is going to be more advantageous to certain interests and less advantageous to others. For example, take the content of the Indonesian government's policy regarding the forests. Indonesia has the third largest tropical forest area in the world, and the Indonesian government has chosen to use the forests as an important springboard of national development by encouraging policies of large-scale

exploitation of the forests for timber with little regard for the economic value of non-timber forest products like rattan and incense or the value of intact forests as a biodiversity bank. The government's policy is to convert the tropical forests into large-scale concessions for commercial exploitation by wood-processing firms. Who benefits? Commercial loggers, industrial wood-processing industries, the banks, urban elites in the cities, others. Who loses? People who have depended on non-timber products from the forests, perhaps eventually people in the North and South who will be affected by global warming, future generations denied the biodiversity inherent in tropical forests, others. The matter is not that simple, and this example can be elaborated considerably; the illustration is only meant to underline the important political point that some benefit from the content of dominant courses of action, or policies, more than others. The political context of an environmental problem always involves manifest or latent conflict between the interests of those who benefit greatly and those who benefit less or not at all.

Conflicts of interest can also divide the North from the South. On the issue of tropical forests, governments in the South are increasingly expressing the view that the North, having historically devastated their own forests and grown rich in the process, are now demanding that the South preserve their forests and stay poor. North-South international conflicts of interest are now a major aspect of the political context of environmental problems. Such conflicts shape policy debates in many settings. For example, at the annual meeting in 1992 of the International Tropical Timber Organisation, comprising representatives of the main producing and consuming states accounting for over 95% of the international trade in tropical timber, there were major disagreements between northern and southern states over a proposed policy to regulate the cutting of timber. The South wanted an 'all-timber' agreement affecting northern and southern forests, the North wanted only a tropical timber agreement.

Political processes of steering and choosing at different levels are shaped by the conflicting interests of those involved. Ultimately, such processes are informed by values. Values are preferences and moral assumptions about what is good or desirable. Any course of action related to an environmental problem is going to reflect certain dominant values and not others. The course of action pursued by the Indonesian government *vis à vis* the forests at Lake Toba rests on a whole set of value preferences which have to do with competition, economic efficiency, the free market, and so on as the desirable way forward for national development and well-being, and at bottom the whole strategy may be said to rest on some moral conception about the value of individual freedom for entrepreneurs and others. Another strategy of development with rather different environmental consequences for the Lake Toba region would de-emphasise such values and give much more weight to sustainable forestry, collaboration, grassroots empowerment, the rights of local communities, and so on. This would amount to a different political project grounded fundamentally in a more egalitarian moral premise.

Naturally, political leaders and others involved in political processes will 'claim to be taking all factors into account when trying to reach a reasonable trade-off between conflicting values and interests' (Goldsworthy, 1988). They will say they are of course 'for' both freedom and equality, 'for' both entrepreneurial enterprise and grassroots empowerment, and so on. But no course of action can be anything like optimal for all

the individuals, groups and social classes involved. What is optimal depends on the values you entertain and these differ between agents. Therefore, biases in favour of certain people and not others are necessarily embedded in environmental policies. That is why the environment is an intrinsically political subject.

Differential power of political agents

Various organisations and other political agents inhabit the international political context of an environmental problem. Each agent is engaged in processes of steering and choosing as framed by conflicting interests and values, and each is also more or less powerful.

Power is like the air we breathe; it is everywhere and invisible. There is no universally agreed definition. There are instead a range of related but different definitions (Lukes, 1986, pp.1–4); Robert Dahl, for example, defined it as the ability of A to get B ‘to do something that B would otherwise not do’ and Nicos Poulantzas said it was ‘the capacity of a class to realise its specific objective interests’. What these different definitions share perhaps is the sense that individuals or organisations have power if they have the capacity to shape action. We shall use the word ‘power’ in this general way in this chapter.

Notice the word ‘capacity’. A may have the capacity to shape the action of B, but A may actually do nothing; B’s actions are nevertheless shaped by A because of what B thinks A could do. For example, a motorist, B, stops at a red light; the action of the driver is shaped by the power of the state, A, as represented in various ordinances and laws. No police or other state officials are in sight, the state does not act, but the power of the state nevertheless shapes the action of this motorist because of what the motorist thinks might happen if he or she breaks the law. This is what Poulantzas implies when he suggests that the structures of society can give a social class or other social organisation like the state the capacity to realise its objectives without actually ‘doing’ anything.

In any social context all agents, individuals and groups, may have some power, but of course some have more than others. The more powerful usually have more, or easier access to, political resources, e.g. physical strength, arms, wealth, information, expertise, organisation, charisma, legitimacy, sanctions that can be applied to others, and so on. Measuring precise amounts of power is virtually impossible, but general evaluations of the relative power of any individual or organisation in relation to political resources are feasible.

Political organisation and other political agents

The international political context of an environmental problem will comprise an extravagantly complex array of agents at various levels whose power, and the interests and values that give it direction, impinges on the problem. These agents comprise groups or organisations which either impact directly on the problem or shape the actions of others who are also directly involved. Moreover, these agents are located at different levels throughout the world and linked together by complex networks of communication and affiliation. Some organisations, like the World Bank, are fairly

durable whereas others, for example the Rio Earth Summit (though not the subsequent so-called 'Rio-process'), are more transitory. Some have full-time employees organised in bureaucratic hierarchies (e.g. governmental departments), others are informal groupings of volunteers animated by a common concern (e.g. Earth First! in the USA, the Chipko movement in India). There are also influential individuals who belong to no group or organisation.

To identify and delineate the relative power relations between all the individuals and informal groupings and organisations throughout the world that impinge directly or indirectly on environmental problems is beyond the capacity of anyone's political understanding, even in principle. However, it is possible and important to be able to identify prominent features of the international political context of any particular environmental problem.

A useful approach to understanding the international political context of an environmental problem is to start by trying to identify prominent organisations and groups and their relative power at local, national, and international levels and to notice the interdependencies between them. Each organisation or group will be steering and choosing in accordance with their particular interests and values, the consequences of which bear directly or indirectly on the international problem. At each level one should



Plate 4.2 Member of the Batak tribe in the rainforest of Palawan Island, Philippines. Photo: Ron Giling/Lineair

start by locating relevant organisations or groups in at least four different worlds: the world of government organisations; the world of business – industrial, financial and other economic organisations; the world of NGOs – organisations that are non-governmental and non-profit; the world beyond formal organisations, e.g. environmental movements, protest groups, voters.

The local level

Take Lake Toba. At the local level, organisations and groups in all four worlds were pursuing courses of action, in co-operation or conflict with each other, that shaped the problem there. From the world of business, Indorayon steered a course of action in pursuit of their interests in making profits from their logging, pulp and paper activities. Indorayon's interests were in conflict with the interests of local people wanting to use the forests in other ways. Indorayon was able to shape local activities to its advantage in this conflict because it had more power due to its command over substantial political resources in comparison with the limited resources of the unorganised Batak people. It also had the support of the state. Local officials of the Forestry and other departments of the Indonesian government administered the law, including Law No. 5 of 1967 making legal the forest concessions which Indorayon were using to their advantage. The local district court and the High Court ruled in favour of Indorayon when local people brought a case against them. The local police moved in and closed down KSPPM, the local NGO working for the local people against Indorayon, thereby tilting the balance of power even more to Indorayon. Understanding the local political context, and the power relations involved helps to explain why the forests around Lake Toba were being adversely affected.

The national level

Such actions, conflicts and power relations that make up the political context locally do not take place in a vacuum. They are shaped by power relations of the four different worlds of organisations and groups at national level. For example, Indorayon's power locally is much enhanced by its being one of the companies in Tanoto's larger Raja Garuda Mas Group. The government of Indonesia's broad economic strategy, backed by the considerable power of the state apparatus, provides a favourable context for the Group's activities and Indorayon's actions at Lake Toba. The government of Indonesia, however, is not a monolith. It is a very large organisation, or rather set of organisations, and there are conflicts and inconsistencies within it. Thus, Emil Salim, a well-known Minister for Population and Environment for many years (until 1993), used to express himself fairly freely in Cabinet on behalf of environmental concerns, and, although he was highly regarded, he was also regularly overruled by the Ministers for Forestry, Industries and others. Some progressive environmental legislation gradually found its way into the statute books. Emil Salim actually had good connections with all the environmental NGOs in the country, sometimes supporting their activities, at other times disagreeing sharply with them. Such national level tensions and inconsistencies between different Ministries within the government had an effect locally and compromised somewhat the overall power of the local state.

Two NGOs in Jakarta were also prominent at the national level of the political context. One was SKEPHI, a forest-specific NGO. The other was WALHI, an umbrella organisation linking hundreds of local NGOs throughout the country; one of these local NGOs was KSPPM at Lake Toba. WALHI, represented by the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, brought a court case against Indorayon, the national Ministries for Population and Environment, Forestry and Industries, the National Investment Co-ordination Board and the Governor of North Sumatra arguing that the Indorayon factory had been licensed without completing an Environmental Impact Analysis required by Indonesian law. WALHI lost the case, but won the right to stand for the environment, thereby setting a useful precedent in environmental law. Through these and other actions by local and national NGOs, the local Batak people could be said at least to have some representation in the Indonesian political arena.

Such representation, even if only rather marginal, is important given the authoritarian character of Indonesia's political regime. Indeed, WALHI and SKEPHI and other NGOs are tolerated by the Indonesian state as useful 'pressure valves' enabling middle class people to let off steam and ventilate their grievances; they are useful precisely because the Indonesian state does not permit competitive elections enabling voters from time to time to shape the composition of the government. Also, civil and political rights appropriate to democratic regimes are severely compromised in Indonesia. Individual citizens have difficulty forming associations of like-minded people to lobby the government. Most people at Lake Toba, in short, have little influence, and this is an important aspect of the distinctive political context of the environmental problem there. Indorayon and the state do not rule supreme, but their capacity to shape action locally to suit their interests is impressive. The political context of, say, a local forest problem in a more democratic setting might look a little different.

The international level

Indorayon and the Indonesian state also do not reign supreme because their actions are shaped by the power of organisations at the international level. Indorayon's behaviour at Lake Toba, for example, was shaped by the need to service the loan from the Swiss Bank Corporation; and the Indonesian state forest policies that affect Lake Toba so profoundly are shaped by a large and complex array of organisations and processes in the international arena. The most important international processes affecting the national state and the company relate to international debt, trade and aid.

As for debt, the data in Table 4.1 show that Indonesia owed over \$53 billion to external creditors in 1989 (see column 5); of the ten main rainforest countries in Asia, only India, because of its great size, comes out in the table as more heavily in debt.

The problem for the Indonesian government of servicing that debt jumped substantially between 1980 and 1989 as columns 6 and 7 of Table 4.1 suggest. The Indonesian government has had to find a way to earn foreign exchange to repay rising debts. One thing the government has done is to exploit the large tropical forest (see columns 1–4) for timber and timber-based products, for which there is a substantial demand internationally. Overexploitation is the more appropriate word; Indonesia's deforestation rate of 12,000 square kilometres per year (see column 1) was by far the highest in Asia, and indeed in the world after Brazil. The connection between deforestation and

Table 4.1 Deforestation and debt service ratios in some Asian countries: the 1980s Source: FOE (1992), p. 13. Note: the debt figures were taken from World Bank (1991). The figures related to forest loss are from Myres (1989).

Country	Annual deforestation rate (square kms) 1989	Forest already lost (square kms) 1989	Remaining forest (square kms) 1989	Percent original forest remaining 1989	Total external debt 1989	Debt as a percentage of exports 1980/1989	
Burma (Myanmar)	8,000	225,000	245,000	52%	1,761	25.4	30.4
India	4,000	1,435,000	165,000	10%	62,509	9.1	26.4
Indonesia	12,000	360,000	860,000	70%	53,111	13.9	35.2
Kampuchea	500	53,000	67,000	56%	nd	nd	nd
Laos	1,000	42,000	68,000	62%	949	nd	15.6
Malaysia	4,800	148,000	157,000	51%	18,576	6.3	14.6
Papua New Guinea	3,500	65,000	360,000	85%	2,496	13.8	34.3
Philippines	2,700	200,000	50,000	20%	28,902	26.5	26.3
Thailand	6,000	361,000	74,000	17%	23,466	18.7	15.9
Vietnam	3,500	200,000	60,000	23%	nd	nd	nd

debt has been widely acknowledged; for example, the EC said in 1989 that ‘international debt obligations... can lead developing country governments to accelerate the rate of forest exploitation in order to earn needed foreign exchange’ (reported in FOE, 1992, p.12), and the Forest Principles agreed at the Earth Summit at Rio in 1992 recognised ‘the importance of redressing external indebtedness’. Others dispute that there is a causal connection between international debt and deforestation.

The Indonesian government’s rising debts are owed to private creditors, commercial banks, other governments (bilateral debt) and international organisations like the World Bank (multilateral debt). These organisations do not tell the Indonesian government to destroy the tropical forests, but the political leverage they have through Indonesia’s debt obligations and the conditions attached to loans shapes the policies of the Indonesian government in the direction of exploiting a primary natural resource valued in the international market. Such international organisations are part of the international political context that affects the thinking of Indonesia’s political leadership when they consider the forests in relation to national development strategy.

The Indonesian government also has had to contend with the politics of the international trade in tropical timber governed by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the ITTO (International Tropical Timber Organisation), northern governments and intergovernmental bodies. For example, in the decade or so after the

Indonesian government promulgated the Basic Forest Law of 1967, many of the forest concessions from which logs were exported were dominated by large multinational corporations, e.g. Weyerhaeuser, Georgia Pacific, Sumitomo, Mitsubishi. The economic benefits of these activities for the Indonesian government were modest. In consequence, the government decided in 1980 to ban the export of raw logs from 1985 onwards; they wanted to reap more benefit from the logging industry, build up their pulp and paper industries (which led to the establishment of Indorayon), and capture a larger share of the world plywood market. They also said the ban was environmentally sound. Fewer logs would be needed to earn the same amounts of hard currency. Most of the multinational companies left Indonesia in the next few years for easier profits in Papua New Guinea or eastern Malaysia.

Indonesia's plywood business boomed, most of it involving indigenous companies. In 1987, however, the EC complained to GATT that Indonesia's ban on the export of certain tropical hardwoods violated GATT rules. Eventually, the Indonesian government had to reverse its policy, notifying GATT in 1992 that the ban had been revoked and at the same time announcing also higher taxes on exports of raw timber. Once again, we see the national government's policies in relation to the forests being shaped by the power of international organisations and processes.

As for international aid, probably the most significant instrument affecting the Indonesian government's forest policy has been the TFAP (Tropical Forest Action



Plate 4.3 Commercial exploitation of tropical rainforest, Kalimantan, Indonesia. Photo: Ron Giling/Lineair

Plan) under the direction of the World Bank, the FAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), and the WRI (World Resources Institute – a think tank in Washington DC). TFAP is a global mechanism meant to address the problem of deforestation by identifying priorities for action in individual developing countries that aid donors (including foreign governments) can target. About \$8 billion was to be spent on such projects from the mid-1980s. Each national plan was to be worked out over a period of time by consultation between foreign experts and international donor agencies together with government officials in the country concerned. The Indonesian National Tropical Plan has not been made public but it is known that the main assumption of the plan is that the forest people, like the Batak at Lake Toba, are targeted as the main problem, not logging companies. There is no mention of the fact that the Batak people have been engaged in sustainable use of the forests for centuries. Here we have an example of international aid flowing in support of a particular view of the environmental problem in the forests that shapes and reinforces the national government's view of it. Such processes are therefore also part of the international political context.

NGOs, North and South, are also part of the international political context affecting national government policy and the actions of companies and corporations working in the forests. Reference was made earlier to such NGOs in the Lake Toba case, e.g. NOVIB in The Netherlands and FOE (International). NGOs and North-South coalitions have continued to press for changes in environmental policy at international levels. They have, for example, been critical of TFAP, e.g. 'the plan not only is failing dismally to meet its objectives, but will actually accelerate the already catastrophic rate of forest loss world wide' (Lohmann and Colchester, 1990, p.92); and 'an ecological Frankenstein has been unleashed' (Rich, quoted in Ekins, 1992, p.150). NGOs have also proposed alternatives, e.g. TFAP should be a bottom-up process involving centrally the people who live in the forests, not a top-down process controlled by northern and southern elites. NGOs lobby at meetings of GATT, ITTO, the World Bank, northern governments. They attempt to shift the activities of companies and corporations; RAN in San Francisco, for example, regularly demonstrates against the Mitsubishi Corporation at trade fairs in the USA, drawing attention to destructive practices of Mitsubishi companies in tropical forests. Such NGOs and NGO coalitions have fewer political resources than governments and corporations and are therefore less powerful, but they do have some influence at times in limiting damage or hastening environmentally friendly decisions which would otherwise have taken longer.

Structures of power

The previous sections have emphasised that the international political context of an environmental problem involves the *actions* of four worlds of political organisations (government, business, NGOs, social movements) and other political actors who, as agents, are more or less powerful at international, national and local levels. This aspect can be referred to as the *agency* of power – the actions of specific organisations or groups that shape behaviour and choices affecting the environment. Dahl's definition of power, referred to earlier, is mainly about this aspect of power – 'the ability of A to get B to *do* something that B would otherwise not do'.

There is, however, another aspect of power. The contemporary international political context of an environmental problem involves structures of power inherited from the past, accumulated legacies of past practice and beliefs and past privilege. Poulantzas' definition of power – 'the capacity of a class to realise its specific objective interests' – is more in keeping with this aspect. He is implying that the structure of society generally can enable a social class, e.g. a capitalist class, to benefit without it actually 'doing' anything. Identifying the international political context of an environmental problem requires being alive both to the agency and structure of power relations bearing on the problem.

Structure and agency are intimately related. Political organisations and groups as agents adopt policies, pursue courses of action, co-operate or run into conflict with each other. Their actions as agents are shaped by structures of power or underlying processes of a more enduring kind over which they have little or no control. For example, WALHI and SKEPHI in Indonesia pursue policies meant to safeguard the tropical forests there and the interests of people who live in them. These NGOs are in conflict with other political organisations and groups, like Indorayon and the Indonesian government, in ways which also have consequences for the forests and the people in them. But this interorganisational activity does not take place in a vacuum. It is framed by structures of power which help to determine the outcomes of political struggles between the groups and organisations by being more favourable to some groups than others.

Four dimensions of power structure can be identified: the economic, the social, the ideological and the political:

- *Economic structure of power.* All political struggles inhabit, for example, a global economic structure of power, a dynamic world of global capitalism dominated by private ownership, production for profit, the accumulation of profit, competitive struggles between large corporations and companies, reliance by such organisations on wage labour and continuing tensions between owners and workers in such organisations. The Indonesian state is powerfully influenced to manage its economy within that context for that is the world it inherited from the past and inhabits now. Its policies in relation to its tropical forests are shaped profoundly by the constraints of that economic structure. Also, capitalist organisations like Indorayon using the forests for capital accumulation and profit are, broadly speaking, advantaged by that economic structure more than environmental NGOs (which are non-profit) and local people using the forest for their own needs.
- *Social structure of power.* That general way of organising economic production tends to create and sustain particular social structures of power – class, gender, ethnic and other interlocking inequalities which are relatively entrenched. Powerful interests are served by, and organised in relation to, these structures from which they benefit. By enhancing their power, the social structure enables such interests to have a disproportionate influence on environmental policy.
- *Ideological structure of power.* Dominant ideologies – sets of collective beliefs – can also be said to form a structure of power. Such ideologies help people to make sense of, and accept, the prevailing social structure from which ruling groups and other powerful interests benefit. There can also be counter-ideologies which

question the existing structure and serve the interests of subordinate groups (Ekins, 1992). Environmental movements and NGOs representing them may be said to be advancing new ideologies – new ideas about the forests, for example, which see them not as a resource to be plundered for profit by the few but as a precious asset to be sustained for all for the benefit of present and future generations.

- *Political structure of power.* Environmental policy makers also must work within the constraints and opportunities provided by political structures of power. An environmental NGO, for example, is confronted by an international system of nation states and other international organisations; even if many NGOs get together they cannot immediately get rid of that system and replace it with, say, an environmentally-friendly world government. Governments, corporations, NGOs and other political organisations and groups must work within that political framework and understand its particular configurations of power in order to advance their particular interests. Similarly, within particular societies, politicians and other political actors inherit a political structure and set of political processes which they cannot do much about, at least not immediately.

Summary

So far it has been suggested that identifying the international political context of an environmental problem requires paying attention to four main features:

- There are those general processes of steering and choosing by governments, economic organisations, NGOs and other political organisations at international, national and local levels. Such processes produce, amongst other things, environmental policies or courses of action by organisations that cause or otherwise affect the environmental problem.
- There are the interests and values expressed in the content of such policies affecting the environmental problem and other conflicting interests and values not expressed there. Identifying a political context means comprehending such conflicting interests and values related to the policies of various powerful organisations, and recognising whose interests are better served by those policies.
- There are the myriad political organisations and other political agencies whose actions affect the environmental problem, each of which is more or less powerful. They can be grouped roughly into the worlds of government, business, NGOs, and social movements at local, national and international levels.
- There are more enduring structures of power that shape the power and actions of political organisations, determine whose interests and values prevail, and frame the processes of steering and choosing at different levels.

4.4 Political contexts: variation and change

The story of the deforestation at Lake Toba sketched in section 4.2 provided illustrations of the four abstract features of the political context of an environmental problem. Of course, deforestation is only one environmental problem. All environmental problems have political contexts containing processes of steering and choosing at

different levels, conflicting interests and values and relations of power. But each political context has distinctive features. In the following section a wider array of examples is used to demonstrate four different dimensions which help differentiate the political context of environmental problems:

- *Scope and scale of the environmental problem.* First, political contexts vary depending on the scope and scale of the environmental problem. Some problems are global, e.g. depletion of the earth's ozone layer (as discussed in Chapter 3); others are local, e.g. pollution of Brighton beach in southern England. The political context of the former is distinct from the one at Brighton beach because of the sheer number of political agencies involved and the greater complexities of reaching agreed courses of action due to the wider array of values and interests that need to be accommodated. What makes ozone a global environment problem (and pollution at Brighton beach not a global problem)? One of two criteria must be satisfied (Porter and Brown, 1991, p. 15): either the environmental consequences of an economic activity (e.g. producing CFCs and halons) are global or the political actors (state and non-state) involved transcend a single region of the globe. Deforestation at Lake Toba is therefore also a global environmental problem because the political actors involved certainly transcend a single region and the consequences of the activity there have at least a marginal impact on the loss of biodiversity and global warming.
- *Control of the environmental problem.* Political contexts also vary depending on whether or not the activity producing the environmental problem is considered to be under the control of a nation state. Some activity takes place in areas not under such control, like the atmosphere, the oceans and the deep sea bed. Such areas are part of the so-called global commons, and there are distinctive political features of international efforts by so many states to manage the commons (Vogler, 1992). The political context of such problems in the global commons is distinctive by virtue of the relevant conventions and protocols that have been agreed or by the efforts to reach such agreements. We will come back to such agreements in a moment. Other global environmental problems not part of the commons are more firmly under the jurisdiction of nation states. Tropical forests and land degradation are examples. The political context of such problems is distinguished by the greater prominence of states trying to insist on their 'sovereign' right to control their forests or land for their own benefit rather than necessarily in accordance with the interests of some global constituency.
- *Advancement on the environmental agenda.* Political contexts also vary depending on the extent to which the environmental issue has advanced on the global environmental agenda. That agenda has now been agreed, at least in principle, by virtually all of the nation states when government leaders accepted Agenda 21 at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (see Chapter 1 and Box 1).

Some of the issues in Agenda 21 are further advanced than others, in the sense that they are the subject of multilateral conventions and protocols among at least some nation states. (For detailed discussion on conventions, protocols and other legal instruments, see Chapter 5.) Furthest advanced, perhaps, by the mid-1990s was ozone; fairly tough multilateral agreements had been reached. Other issues were less well advanced. For example, there were no agreed conventions or protocols

on freshwater resources and water quality, land degradation and desertification or deforestation and degradation of forests; and there was only a Framework Convention on Climate Change, agreed at Rio. Once conditions and protocols are agreed, then there are implementation stages involving monitoring and verification and political actors working to bring other relevant actors into the agreements in order to strengthen them. The political context of environmental problems can vary depending on whether multilateral agreements are strong, weak or non-existent. Explaining why an environment issue moves from one stage to another involves identifying and analysing its political context, including the transnational political processes relating to that issue.

- *The 'level' of democracy.* Lastly, the political context of an environmental issue can vary depending on whether the political regime involved is more or less democratic (see Box 2).

Democratic regimes may be more open and less secretive, with more independent and outspoken media, and are therefore more willing to accept the monitoring and verification procedures that are an essential element in implementing and ensuring the credibility of multilateral environmental agreements. Democratic regimes are also more likely to enable environmental NGOs to flourish, and to be allowed to participate in environmental policy making. Democratic regimes, however, do not necessarily always provide environmentally advantageous political contexts. Also, environmental disasters may be so palpable that they will achieve prominence on the political agenda regardless of whether a regime is democratic or not. Despite such ambiguities regarding the general relationship between democracy and the environment, it is clear that the political context of an environmental problem, including the relative power of different political organisations and groups, will look somewhat different depending on whether relevant political regimes are more or less democratic.

Environmental issues in Agenda 21

Agenda 21 is a long document but one can say that there are broadly ten issues on the global agenda:

- atmosphere pollution
- ozone depletion (in the stratosphere)
- climate change
- marine pollution
- freshwater resources and water quality
- land degradation and desertification
- deforestation and degradation of forests
- loss of biological diversity
- environmental disasters
- environmentally sound management of toxic, hazardous and radioactive wastes.

See: Tolba (1992).

What is a democratic regime?

Democratic regimes are distinguished by at least the following: rulers are accountable to the ruled through representative assemblies and governments formed at regular intervals through competitive elections based on universal adult suffrage involving multiple political parties providing reasonable choice for the voters; there is a diversity of power centres within the state and in society generally; there are guarantees in law of civil and political rights and freedoms; there is political participation by people throughout society in collective decisions that directly affect their lives. Democracy has historically been about lessening the unequal distribution of power, about the empowerment of subordinate classes and groups through the vote, representation and increased political participation in the collective concerns of society (Rueschemeyer *et al.*, 1992).

Changing political contexts

A point which needs to be emphasised is that political contexts change through time. Take, for example, in reverse order the four points just made about the variability of political contexts.

First, political regimes can change as authoritarian regimes move in a more democratic direction, a process of political change called democratisation. In the 1990s democratisation has been occurring in a number of countries in Eastern Europe, Asia and elsewhere, and there have been a number of attempts to explain this phenomenon (e.g. in Held, 1993). It is possible that the potential for more effectively tackling environmental problems in these regions may be enhanced as democratisation proceeds. Then again, it may follow that environmental problems will not be tackled, at least not at first.

Second, political contexts change when conventions and protocols are agreed. Parties to such agreements then begin to meet on a more regular basis to discuss both the implementation of the environmental agreement and strategies for getting other relevant political actors to join. Changing legal and other constraints also changes the political context. For example, the Montreal Protocol on Ozone in 1987 committed signatories to specific reductions in CFC and halon manufacture. The 1990 London Conference then tightened these regulations, committing developed country signatories to a complete phase-out by the year 2000 and the possibility of economic sanctions in cases of non-compliance. The political context of the ozone problem by the mid-1990s had changed considerably from what it was only ten years previously.

Third, political contexts of environmental problems in the global commons change as the technological capability to exploit the commons increases. For example, traditionally the ocean commons were open to all for use beyond the famous 'three mile limit', the reason being that the prevailing technology was such that anyone's cannon shot could not travel further than about three miles. More recently, new technologies have changed the nature of the ocean commons and the uses made of it, some of which are polluting, and these dangers have stimulated multilateral conventions and protocols

regulating activities at sea, e.g. the 1972 Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and other Matter; the 1976 Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution, and several related protocols.

Fourth, the political context of environmental problems is changing as the scope and scale of economic and technological activity, and its adverse environmental consequences, are increasingly globalised. This has led to the increasing globalisation of environmental politics. One consequence of this is that there has been a marked increase lately in co-operative endeavour by states and international agencies in the form of agreed conventions and protocols, which are seen as necessary to deal effectively with many contemporary environmental problems. In short, political contexts are changing as 'sovereign' states acting alone find themselves unable to cope with environmental problems having global causes and consequences. This leads to the subject of the final main section of this chapter.

4.5 Sovereignty and the state

The nation state (and its power) has figured importantly in the discussion so far. Notice that the state's power is conditional (see Box 3). The state *seeks* predominance and *aims* to institute binding rules. What this underlines is that the state's predominance may be strong and effective, but it may also be weak and reflexive, so weak indeed that the state's power may really be of little consequence beyond the walls of the political leader's compound.

Conventionally allied to the idea and reality of the state, but distinct from it, is the theory of *sovereignty*. This amounts to a claim by the state to supreme authority over the people within its jurisdiction and over the course of events (both social and physical) within its domain (Camilleri and Falk, 1992). This claim by each state is legally recognised in principle by all the others, creating a world partitioned into separate domains with (in principle) uncontestable physical boundaries, each sovereign state having supreme authority over its particular society, economy and ecology.

3

What is the state?

The state is an ensemble of political institutions – coercive, administrative, legal – distinguished from other organisations in society in 'seeking predominance over them and in aiming to institute binding rules over the activities of other organisations within its boundaries' (Azarya, 1988, p.10). Each state also aims to provide security from foreign intervention for people within its boundaries by conducting relations, both peaceful and warlike, with other states. A state also seeks continually to promote a sense of national identity and common citizenship in order to have its rule accepted by the people (or at least some of the people) as legitimate, and in doing so to define away or suppress competing ideologies subversive of the state's rule and what the state defines as 'the national interest'. This process of legitimation is central to the reproduction through time of any state form.

The theory of sovereignty not only sharply delimits space in this way; it also presupposes that the state's supreme authority extends indefinitely backwards and forwards in time. State leaders have regularly proclaimed their 'sovereign right' historically to such control, free from 'outside interference' in the country's internal affairs. Over time, these ideas have become an important ingredient of the state's political consciousness, invoked frequently by political leaders to explain and justify state policies and actions and widely believed in society more generally.

Despite the power of the idea, the theory of sovereignty has always been a legal fiction. Historically, powerful states have intervened repeatedly in the affairs of weaker states; and the legal sovereignty of a state has always been more or less compromised in practice by transnational economic and social processes. Although thoughtful observers have always recognised the 'tensions between interdependence and sovereignty in world politics' (Di Muccio and Rosenau, 1992), by the 1990s the mismatch between the theory of sovereignty and the political reality of the modern world was becoming increasingly obvious. President Bill Clinton remarked in his Inaugural Address in January 1993 that 'there is no clear division today between what is foreign and what is domestic'. In Europe in the 1990s, it has been argued that 'all *significant* societies are either larger or smaller than the nation state' (Mulhern, 1993, p.199). The mismatch is nowhere clearer than in the difference between the description of reality implied in the theory of sovereignty and the dynamics of the environment.

It is transparently clear that environmental problems, their causes and consequences do not come tidily packaged within the confines of states. The previous three chapters have made this abundantly clear when considering the depletion of the ozone layer, acid rain, and many other environmental problems. Even the problem at Lake Toba, seemingly a very local affair within a nation state, is seen upon careful examination to be shaped by an international political context. States rarely have 'supreme authority' over environmental problems, as the theory of sovereignty presupposes, because their environmental policies are determined more or less by international debt obligations, international trade arrangements, other international economic agreements and conditions, international security arrangements, international environmental conventions or protocols and broader class structures as well as domestic political considerations.

This does not mean that state power is of no consequence. Indeed, states are still more or less autonomous and powerful within the international political context and what they do or fail to do can have major positive or negative impacts on environmental problems. But states are not sovereign even though state leaders still like to proclaim that they are. Even with regard to those environmental problems, where the state apparently rules supreme, the theory of sovereignty is misleading (see Box 3).

Nuclear power provides a good example. This would appear to be pre-eminently a matter in which each state has had 'supreme authority' (sovereign power) to opt for a nuclear industry, develop it, control crucial aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle even after transferring some aspects of it to private companies, defend nuclear power by obscuring from public view its environmental hazards, and so on. Yet even nuclear power has an international political context. For example, the apparent freedom of the state to determine a 'need' for nuclear power has often been shaped by strong pressure from external nuclear vendor companies, who work with international banks to provide low-interest loans to enable states to purchase nuclear reactors on favourable

terms. Such foreign technologies, once obtained, can lead to the receiving state relying increasingly on international vendor companies for expert advice, replacement parts, maintenance, and so on (Camilleri and Falk, 1992, p.189). Attempting to understand the causes of state decisions about nuclear power is not helped by a theory of sovereignty which ignores the international political and economic context in which the state acts.

Nuclear power also provides a classic example of how the theory of sovereignty fails to cope with environmental consequences. As Chapter 3 shows, when the Chernobyl reactor near Kiev caught fire on 26 April 1986, it spewed clouds of radioactive gases into the air for ten days which drifted easily across many states in Europe and elsewhere causing significant increases in radiation levels and threatening the lives of state citizens. It was a stunning demonstration of the mismatch between the theory of sovereignty and the reality of modern technologies which can pose environmental risks beyond the control of any one state.

Implications for the theory of sovereignty

Generally, then, the theory of sovereignty is a poor guide to the role of the state in environmental problems. More than that, it is actually misleading because it can obscure both the causes and the consequences of such problems. In addition, according to Camilleri and Falk (1992, Ch.7), there are at least three other implications to be drawn from the theory of sovereignty that have adverse consequences for environmental problems and political efforts to cope with them.

First, the theory insulates the state from the international environmental consequences of its actions. Each state claims the 'sovereign right' within its domain to make decisions on complex environmental problems. Such decisions may have appalling environmental consequences for people living beyond the state's domain, but the theory of sovereignty enables that state to defend such decisions as legitimate choices by a sovereign power with supreme authority. Furthermore, other states in principle respect their sovereignty.

Second, the world being divided into many sovereign states, each respecting the sovereign right of others, makes for a formidable impediment to concerted action to meet environmental challenges transcending state boundaries. Anyone who has been involved in trying to orchestrate interstate agreements in the form of environmental conventions and protocols can attest to the difficulties posed by representatives of states insisting on not compromising their 'sovereign rights' over activities within their domain. The history of such agreements that have been reached has been marked by efforts to overcome what can be called the discourse of sovereignty. For example, the negotiations between France, The Netherlands and Germany on measures to protect the Rhine against pollution eventually had to rise above the sovereignty discourse; according to that discourse, France, for example, could do what it liked in relation to a river flowing through its domain. As one expert remarked after an interstate agreement about the Rhine had been reached, 'legal developments concerning protection of the Rhine against pollution show that nothing can be done in this field at the national level. Pollution control in Europe requires international co-operation ...' (Kiss, 1985, p.637).

Third, a collection of many sovereign states each with their own laws and regulations enables organisations whose activities are polluting or otherwise environmentally damaging to move from countries that adopt strict environmental controls to other countries whose laws are less strict. In this way, the theory of sovereignty serves the interest of a transnational polluting industry, for example, by enabling it to argue that the state to which it has shifted its operation has the sovereign right to decide what laws and regulations are best for its particular domain, and that we, the polluting industry, are merely pursuing our legitimate interest within the laws of that state. An example is Union Carbide locating one of the dirtier aspects of their pesticides business in Bhopal, India, where enforcement of national legislation to regulate safety measures at pesticides factories was not rigorous. In 1984 an emission of lethal gas at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal killed an estimated 3000 people (at least), injured at least 200,000 more, and had devastating environmental consequences (Shrivastava, 1992).

The theory of sovereignty – that states have ‘supreme authority’ within their boundaries – is both a legal fiction and a powerful idea with important environmental consequences. It is fiction because the state has never had such supreme authority and people and environments within states have always, and increasingly today, been affected by transnational processes over which states have little or no control. It is still a powerful idea, however, because many state leaders regularly proclaim as real their sovereign right to determine the destiny of the national community (even though they know better), many people still actually assume (without really thinking about it) that states have such supreme authority, and leaders of other states continue to respect (or at least pay lip service to) the claim because it strengthens their own claim and sense of self-importance. As the 20th century draws to a close, the charade of sovereignty is being increasingly exposed by global economic processes of production and exchange beyond state control, by global political processes that shape what states can and cannot do, by modern technologies that ‘shrink the globe’ and ignore the state, by environmental problems whose causes and consequences implicate many states, and by other globalising processes.

It does not follow from this exposé of the theory of sovereignty that the state itself is becoming increasingly unimportant. The idea of the state and the theory of sovereignty are two quite separate things, as was made clear earlier. States are not sovereign but they are powerful, and in some settings very powerful, within international political contexts. Indeed, a smaller or weaker state may actually become more powerful or influential when it abandons the pretext of sovereignty and joins other states in forming interstate agreements binding on all of them.

Within international political contexts the state can be profoundly important in relation to environmental problems in three general ways. First, the state as a *powerful agent* in society can adopt and implement policies nationally or locally that directly cause environmental problems or exacerbate ones that already exist. The British government during the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, pursued a policy (pressed on it by the Central Electricity Generating Board) of not fitting antipollution equipment to its largest power stations. The possible effects on trees in Norway, Germany and other European countries downwind of these power stations had been widely publicised for years. Less well known until recently was the effect on British trees; a joint survey in 1993 by the EC and the UN Economic Commission for Europe reported

that the proportion of trees moderately or severely affected by ‘blight’ was higher in Britain than in any other of the 34 European and former Soviet countries surveyed, and that virtually all scientific and other experts in Europe (apart from the state-owned British Forestry Commission) were now almost certain that the ‘blight’ throughout Europe was caused principally by that noxious brew of pollutants to which the British power stations made such a significant contribution (Lean, 1993).

Of course, the state as a powerful agent in society can also adopt and implement policies that directly contribute to the solution of environmental problems or result in distinct improvements. For example, the implementation of the Clean Air Act passed by the British Parliament in 1956 contributed (along with changes in central heating fuels, fewer sources of industrial pollution and lower density developments) to the gradual reduction in levels of coal dust that had hitherto afflicted the people of London.

Second, the state can deliberately provide an *enabling structure* for other organisations and groups in society whose actions directly affect environmental problems. One such enabling structure is the particular content and character of the law and of law enforcement agencies administered by the state which non-state economic organisations, NGOs and others can use in various ways which have direct consequences for the environment. Another enabling structure may be said to be the set of economic policies favourable to capitalist accumulation, including policies to control the labour force, which provide essential infrastructure for capitalist economic development which may or may not be environmentally sustainable. An illustration from this chapter of how important both these enabling structures in combination can be is the way in which the Indonesian government in 1967 created vast logging concessions in much of the country’s tropical forest which enabled private capitalist logging companies to move in and make huge profits with devastating environmental consequences at Lake Toba and elsewhere.

Third, the state can be a *structural obstacle* blocking advances towards more environmentally sustainable forms of development. In this aspect, the state neither deliberately creates enabling structures nor actively makes environmental policy. Instead, it does nothing (structural power), but its sheer presence blocks avenues of advance for people whose livelihoods are threatened by disturbances of physical resource upon which they depend and who want to do something about it. When the state is perceived by ordinary people – peasants, workers, others – as such an obstacle, then forms of collective struggle may be generated which combine defence against further threats to their livelihoods with resistance to the structures of the state and the power of capitalists and landlords who benefit from those structures (see Box 4 for an example).

This example of Chipko shows that the three aspects of state power are not mutually exclusive; through time the Indian state moved from being a structural obstacle to initiating as an agent a particular course of action. Furthermore, a state can even be simultaneously a powerful agent regarding environmental problem A, provide an enabling structure for environmental problem B, and be a structural obstacle for environmental problem C. Whatever the combinations, it is clear that the power of the state in relation to environmental problems is such that it can both be a major part of the problem and provide a major part of the solution. The state through its actions or sheer presence can do great environmental damage, but state policies can also be

The emergence of Chipko Aandolan (literally translated as the ‘hugging’ movement) in the foothills of the Garhwal Himalaya

In India in the 1970s, in response to growing threats to their livelihoods from logging operations and growing dissatisfaction about the distribution of profits from forest resources to forest contractors through the ‘contract system’ maintained by the state, village people, especially women, began to hug trees identified for the chop and these actions were so successful that they spread more widely in the Himalaya and elsewhere in India (Khator, 1991; Guha, 1991). The targets of the movement included state officials, who were perceived as in alliance with the contractors. Chipko became an environmental movement, a struggle against economic exploitation, and more generally an effort to undermine the structural obstacle of the Indian state. Eventually, in 1980, the state stopped being an obstacle and acted (a little). The Prime Minister (Indira Gandhi) declared a temporary ban on logging in the Garhwal Himalaya.

environmentally beneficial and when international environmental protocols are agreed to control certain activities having adverse environmental consequences, it is currently only the state which is in a position to enforce such agreements.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with two main questions:

- What are the main features of the international political context of an environmental problem?
- What is the significance of the ‘sovereign state’ in relation to environmental problems?

In approaching the first question it was necessary to define the word ‘political’ and then to use the definition to suggest that an environmental problem always has a political context because it is affected by processes of steering and choosing which are favourable to certain interests and values (and not others) and which involve relations of power. In dealing with the first question it was suggested that the tough business of identifying the international political context of an environmental problem means paying attention to those four main features in the definition of the word ‘political’ as they relate to the problem. The example of the environmental problem at Lake Toba was used here.

As for the second question it was argued that states are not ‘sovereign’ in the sense of having supreme authority over people and events within their boundaries, even though many people still believe that states are sovereign and this belief has environmental consequences. But although not sovereign, states are certainly more or less powerful and autonomous within international political contexts, and they have the

capacity to affect environmental problems positively or negatively in profoundly significant ways by virtue of their power as agents and structures.

So what? Does knowing about the political context of environmental problems actually matter to anyone besides academic people who write chapters in books? The answer is that it matters very much to anyone wanting to understand who or what is causing an environmental problem. If people in an NGO, for example, understand that the causes are at least partly political, and if they perceive correctly who or what they are up against politically and who or what to target, then they are more likely to work collectively in ways that may result in their being more successful in achieving their objectives.

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