



Dr. Gamani Corea.

## Development and Environment: Issues and Perspectives

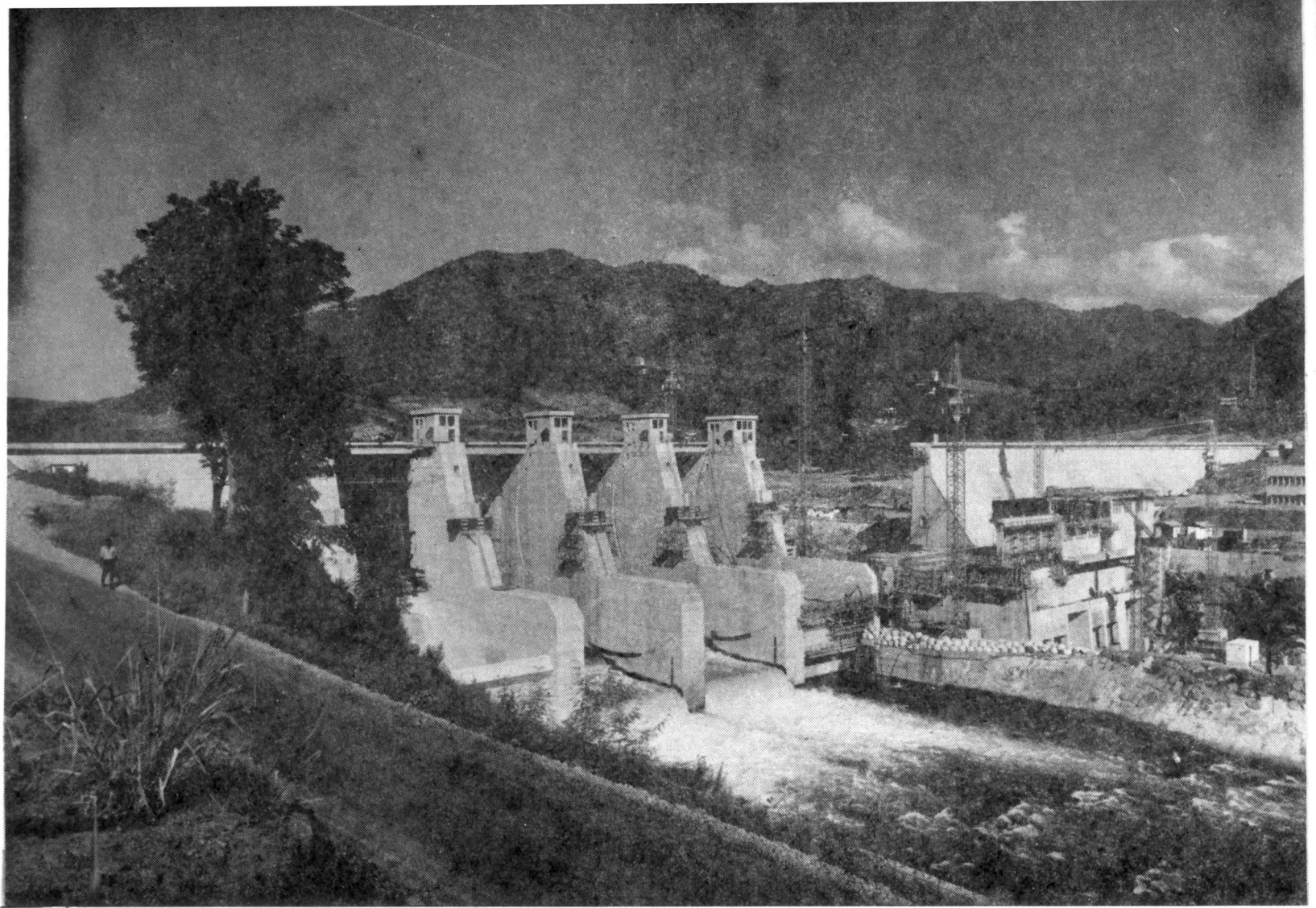
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Questions of development in relation to environment issues are of topical interest. A World Conference is also due to be held in Brazil in 1992 on this theme. To explore some of these main issues Mr. Neil Fernando, Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs interviewed Dr. Gamani Corea. Dr. Corea is widely considered an authority on development issues and has served as Secretary General of UNCTAD, Member on the South Commission and is presently functioning as Chairman of the Institute for Policy Studies; Chancellor, Open University; and other consultancy positions in international bodies.

**Secretary E & PA:** During the past ten years, many in the environment field are espousing a case for "sustainable development". What are your comments?

**Dr. Corea:** I notice that today the word 'development' is hardly used in isolation or allowed to stand alone. It is coupled now to the word 'sustainable' and of course I often ask myself, what does that mean? What are the examples of unsustainable development? Is it the United States or United Kingdom or Western Europe or Japan or Korea or Eastern Europe? I have not been convinced that their development model has brought them to a point of near collapse. Of course, they are doing a lot of damage not just to themselves but to the global ecological system. But it does not mean that their development model is really unsustainable so far.

Now sometimes there is a suggestion that developing countries must follow a different path, and avoid some of the environmentally damaging consequences of the traditional development models adopted by the developed countries. But this other path is certainly not at all clear. I don't like the



concept of having one world and two development patterns — two life styles.

There is a fear that if all the countries of the Third World become rich (in other words if all the world's poor) and live like the rich of today in the industrialised countries, then the planet will become uninhabitable and there will be an ecological catastrophe. This may well be true. But what is the moral of that? That the poor should remain poor? Or that they should have their living standards different to the West? — in which case of course, you will have this dichotomy within the world of one section, having one kind of affluence and the others trying to preserve the world so that developed countries could continue with their life style.

**Secretary:** What alternatives to “sustainable development” do you envisage?

**Dr. Corea:** I feel that the heart of the environment problem is not only sound ecological management by Third World countries, which I agree is a must, but also the need for the industrialised countries to change the patterns of their economic and production structures, and consumption habits so as to come up with living standards which do not damage the world's ecological system. Developed countries should change their life styles and show the way for the other countries to follow. We need “replicable development” as much as sustainable development. So I have not been willing to take for granted that there is such a thing as sustainable development until one knows a little bit more about what that means.

Of course nobody can be for ‘unsustainable development’. But the question is, are the kind of things which developing countries are

trying to do to raise their standards of living, to modernize their technologies, to industrialise, taking them towards a pattern of development which is unsustainable, other than in the sense that if all do it at the same time and succeed, it will have drastic consequences for the world. That is a problem which has to be solved globally and not by the developing countries themselves.

I also feel that the current concern for sound environmental technologies (which I think is unobjectionable), is likely to result in more rather than less costs for developing countries. If you want to select technologies which are not contributing to excessive pollution, these technologies will be more sophisticated, and are going to be more costly than the conventional technologies. If you decide that you will not settle surplus population on land anymore, (because you do not want to destroy the tropical forests, and there are sound arguments for not destroying forests), then the developing countries have to find other avenues of employment for their surplus labour. If these avenues are not going to be in agriculture it is likely to be in industry, and industry has its own problems affecting costs, ecology and the environment. Industry is connected with energy, and energy has its own environmental consequences. It means urbanization, and urbanization leads to pollution and so on.

**Secretary:** What possibilities are open to developing countries?

**Dr. Corea:** Developing countries have a hard choice anyway, how to push forward their development with limited resources. The environmental debate can (if they are not helped by the rest of the world) make these choices harder still and make their development options even more restricted and costly. So I do feel that the logic that the environmental debate is pointing to is the concern for the global environment, which requires a new global pact between developed and developing countries, in which the developing countries would assist the developing countries to achieve their

development goals in a way which does not create irreversible damage not only to their national but to the global environment.

I do not think that developing countries can do this by themselves simply by choosing environmentally more acceptable options because if they do this without assistance, these options may be too little and may not add up to meet the needs, goals and the aspirations of these countries, to reduce poverty, transform their living standards and to have patterns of development that are comparable to what prevails in the richer countries.

**Secretary:** What are your views on the relevance of these issues to Sri Lanka?

**Dr. Corea:** Sri Lanka's ecological question is important. I am encouraged by the fact that there is so much sensitivity and attention, being given to this environmental issue. We have to be careful that both development and the lack of development do not result in irreversible damage to an ecological system particularly through the destruction of the natural habitat which has come down for generations. So I am all in favour and in support of all the voices that are trying to point to the need to be sensitive to do these things. Today it seems to be that one option which has served as an outlet for our growing population (i.e. settlement of new land) is beginning to reach its end. Maybe we have not yet come there. After that, we have to find other ways to providing employment and raising the standards of living.

Amongst these other ways, the development of industries and service sector and raising productivity even in agriculture are all pertinent. It is possible that so far as our development options go, we have more or less come to the end of one phase and are on the threshold of another. It is too early to say, but I think there is something which suggests this in the picture. We should not be unmindful of the fact that ecologically sound methods of development could be more costly than conventional methods which ignored ecological effects and the whole question of



how we are going to find the resources needed to meet that, become pertinent.

**Secretary:** How could the resources for this effort be found?

**Dr. Corea:** I have always felt that the international community has to support developing countries not just in their efforts to develop (which is accepted even though their action is inadequate), but now to support them in their efforts to develop in an ecologically sound way which does not do permanent damage to the global environment. This means more assistance and what I would call the concept of

“additionality”. This means that the present levels of international assistance would have to be increased, and that it should not be just a reshuffling from one type of use to another. Now the question of additionality will loom large at the 1992 Conference. It will probably be one of the major issues, and I think it is central to the whole question of the relationship between environment and development.

**Secretary:** What role do you perceive for the Environment Ministry in these tasks?

**Dr. Corea:** I am very encouraged that we have a Ministry in-charge of Environment and also a Central Environment Authority and also some legislation. I think that the responsibilities of the Government and the Ministry in regard to environment issues will grow inevitably in the future as these issues permeate other aspects. The Ministry for Environment is not an ordinary sectoral Ministry like agriculture or industries dealing with one sector. What the Environment Ministry is doing will permeate other activities as well. It is central to the whole concept of planning.

So, I feel encouraged that we have made a beginning in this area and I hope that this activity will grow and contribute creatively to solve our problems. In many cases one has to have a trade-off between environmental and economic goals. In some cases, there is no trade-off; may be these are mutually reinforcing. But in others you may have to make hard choices.

So, one has to find solutions to the problems which are environmentally acceptable or which minimise environmental damage, but solutions all the same. In many areas such as industrialisation, energy, and growth of cities, we are going to face problems of how to achieve our goals. So we have to solve our problems in a way that is consistent with the preservation of our environment.

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