

EDITORIAL

The United Nations General Assembly has elected Klaus Töpfer (Germany), until now his country's Federal Minister for Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development, as Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Klaus Töpfer, who has a long and distinguished career in both the academic world and in government, first served as Environment Minister in one of the "Länder", before becoming Federal Minister for the Environment. Readers will recall that he was the second Chairman of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (see vol. 24 at page 205). As in the past, we shall be a critical follower of the Executive Director's actions!

Following his election on the 3 December, he stated that economic instruments must be used to harmonize the globalisation of markets with the globalisation of environment policy. "I am convinced that the United Nations can and must exercise political leadership in global environment diplomacy", he said.

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"Globalisation" and "structural change" have been two of the buzz words in 1997, even though the phenomenon is by no means a new one. The concepts represent both hope and fear, depending on the interests concerned and the experience gained. There are many criticisms – that the national State loses its power to counteract events which affect it; that they are simply other words for economic imperialism, pushing political policy into a minor position; and that they diminish society's responsibility until it reaches the smallest common denominator.

Others critics, especially from the environment sphere, say that the economic and technological upheavals caused by globalisation are not imperative, or necessary evils to attain a final goal. Clearly, the political reaction to globalisation will be influenced mostly by what people instinctively feel, and not by what economic experts proclaim. Slow growth and rising inequalities, which are becoming more permanent features of the global economy, have meant that those at the "bottom" have failed to see real gains in living standards, and in some cases have had to endure real losses. Increased stress on the environment, perceived as one result of the change, is widespread. It is not strange that these people see globalisation in a negative way.

However, all agree that in order to face the challenges posed by these concepts, some awkward truths have to be faced – not least that there is now no going back – and that developing economies will need considerable time before there is any real convergence between their economic and social conditions and those of the industrialised world. So for the immediate future, no respite is in sight and environmental degradation is set to increase.

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This issue is the last of Volume 27, the biggest since the establishment of the Journal. Thanks to the Tengelmann Group, the main supporters of KSSF (Germany), and the Elizabeth Haub Foundations (Washington DC and Toronto) – and of course, our publisher – we have been able to give our readers more than double the agreed pages. Our publisher has already complained that he has had to print too many pages!

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1997 was an important, but unfortunately not in all cases a fully satisfying year. Our main expectation for 1998 is the reform of UNEP.

We wish all our readers, especially UNEP's new Executive Director, all the success they need in their endeavours.

- Wolfgang B. Semy -

3 December, 1997