[**Web of resilience**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693233/web-of-resilience)

[Ali Tauqeer Sheikh](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4987/ali-tauqeer-sheikh)

June 5, 2022

The writer is an expert on climate change and development.

PAKISTAN’S development model has still not recognised the limits of the natural environment and the damage it would cause, if violated, to the sustainability of development and to the health and well-being of its population. Pakistan’s environment journey began with Stockholm Declaration in 1972. A delegation led by Nusrat Bhutto represented the country at the Stockholm meeting, resulting in the establishment of the Urban Affairs Division (UAD), the precursor of today’s Ministry of Climate Change. In setting the country’s environmental agenda, we were inspired by the Stockholm Principles, but in reality, we have mostly ignored them for the last five decades. We’ve paid lip service to environmental sustainability without really thinking how this could make our economic growth robust.

On this World Environment Day, the world is celebrating Stockholm+50 to once again draw attention to the centrality of environment-development linkages under the rubric of ‘Only One Earth’. The 26 principles enunciated in the Stockholm Declaration have catalysed a new era of multilateral environmentalism. The world has in the last 50 years steadily built a complex web of linkages between the environment and development. The genesis of at least four principles of primary importance to Pakistan can be traced to the Stockholm Declaration: i) environmental problems are global, not just local, ii) the principle of precaution, requiring immediate action rather than waiting for conclusive scientific evide­n­­ce, iii) the principle of additionality, further expounded as the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” and iv) the ‘polluter pays’ principle, requiring emitters to bear the cost of damage to society and the environment. These principles were adopted and further refined at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 20 years later, in June 1992.

These four principles are now embedded in the Earth Charter as well as in numerous international agreements that form the backbone of the international environmental order, including around 18 multilateral environment agreements (MEA) that Pakistan has signed since. Almost all these agreements are inspired by the principles of Stockholm. Pakistan has also ratified all three Rio conventions — climate change, biodiversity and desertification. These conventions are intrinsically linked and represent a way of contributing to the sustainable development goals of Agenda-21, known as the SDGs.

In the last 50 years, the world has built a web of linkages between environment and development.

Forty years after Stockholm, and 20 years after the Earth Summit, in June 2012, world leaders initiated a process in Rio de Janeiro (Rio+20) for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development to negotiate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs. Finally adopted in 2015, Pakistan affirmed and adopted Agenda-21 with characteristic enthusiasm. It is sometimes argued that the SDGs have taken the concept of sustainable development that had initially emerged from Stockholm and was subsequently defined by the Brundtland Commission in 1988 as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

It is, however not just principles, MEAs, or conventions that were triggered by the Stockholm Confe­rence. A recently released series of studies by the International Institute of Sustainable Development has argued that no less significant has been its contribution to the democratisation of environmental governance. Starting with the conference, global environmental negotiations have unlocked the doors to broader participation of diverse stakeholders in international environmental negotiations. This originates from the belief that governments cannot solve environmental problems alone. The Earth Summit recognised nine major groups as card-carrying delegates — women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, NGOs, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and farmers. It is now recognised that bringing in industry and the private sector is essential to both responding to environmental challenges and scaling up the implementation of MEAs and the SDGs. It is against this backdrop that the annual climate summits have become the largest congregations of environment interest groups.

While this accountability and inclusion has taken root globally, in Pakistan the soil has been less than fertile. From its establishment in 1973 to the end of the Cold War in 1991, the UAD stayed mostly dormant. The Environment Ordinance in 1983 and the Environment Act in 1997 remained top-down and resulted in two rigid dichotomies. Most importantly, contrary to emergent global trends, Pakistan’s environmental policies glossed over the Stockholm Principles and ignored the intrinsic environment-development link. Secondly, it focused on brown environment (urban) issues without having the necessary regulatory competencies or a culture of compliance. In this way, it laid the foundation for an adversarial relationship between the UAD and environmental stakeholders.

This approach has remained dominant for the last 50 years in Pakistan’s environmental decision-making. There are a few refreshing exceptions like the development of the National Conservation Strategy. Prepared over three years, and under the supervision of the deputy chairman, Planning Commission, it benefited from consultations with more than 3,000 sectoral experts and stakeholders. Its development was based on three operating principles: i) achieving greater public partnership in development and management, ii) merging environment and economics in decision-making, and iii) focusing on sustainable improvements in the quality of life. It was committed to increasing government spending on natural resource management and efficiency of resource use from four per cent of national investment to 8pc by 2000. Authored under the insightful leadership of Syed Ayub Qutub, the NCS recommended 14 areas for action — each area fully immersed in the Stockholm Principles. Presented at the Earth Summit in June 1992, for a moment, Pakistan seemed like a global environment leader.

Fifty years after Stockholm, we face a planetary crisis of climate change, propelled by unabated emissions and biodiversity loss made worse by persistent poverty and growing inequalities. This could not have been imagined in 1973 when the UAD was first set up. Now sustainable development has emerged as a cornerstone of the international development discourse. The collective search for solutions to reconcile economic development and environmental management resulted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs in 2015, the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2016, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2018. They all have 2030 as the culmination year, just to remind policymakers before budgetary proposals are finalised.

*The writer is an expert on climate change and development.*

*Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2022*