

# Preface

*Environmental Policy in an International Context* or, to use its familiar acronym, *EPIC*, is a course that developed as a result of discussions between the Dutch and British Open Universities in 1991. Eventually a collaborative project emerged which now consists of three textbooks, a workbook/study guide and six video programmes. The course has been written by an international group of experts able to bring together the latest thinking on a subject area that is relatively new but of immense importance to our future.

The course takes a critical and analytical look at contemporary environmental issues building up a discourse around four key questions. In Volume 1, *Perspectives on Environmental Problems*, the key question is, 'What are international environmental problems, and why have they become important politically?' The question is examined from the different viewpoints of the natural sciences, sociology, politics, law and economics. It is emphasised that a multidisciplinary approach is necessary if we are fully to understand environmental problems. Volume 1 covers various themes. One is that environmental problems have both physical and social aspects and that, therefore, the social context must be understood. A related theme is that environmental problem solving is both a scientific and technical and an economic and political matter. There is a need to assess the relationship between scientific evidence and policy. The scale of contemporary environmental problems is such that policy must be addressed through international arrangements. Volume 1 focuses on conceptual and theoretical analysis, illustrated by a range of environmental issues. It adopts a critical perspective on the concept of *sustainable development*. It is stressed that sustainable development should be seen in terms of the conflicts of interest that arise out of development and distribution problems.

Volume 2, *Environmental Problems as Conflicts of Interest*, considers the interaction between political power, policy making and environmental consequences. The organising principle of Volume 2 is the question, 'What are the causes of international environmental problems, and what are the conflicts surrounding their definition and potential solution?' Volume 2 consists of case studies of specific environmental problems. The logic of the case studies is that they move from the local to the global, analysing the nature of problems in the western world, the former communist countries and the South, concluding with those problems that are truly global, such as the threat of nuclear proliferation, the onset of global warming, and the loss of biodiversity. In Volume 2 it is emphasised that conflicts of interest often have both local and global implications in relation to policy and that resolution of the conflicts must be related to the social context of the problems.

Volume 3, *Prospects for Environmental Change*, goes on to discuss the possibilities for influencing environmental policy at the international level. The question addressed here is, 'What are the major constraints and opportunities that influence environmental policy making in an international context?' The opening chapters consider the role of major international actors, the nation state, non-governmental organisations and the business community in setting the policy-making agenda. The following chapters examine the importance of international relations (trade; West and East; North and South) in setting the context for environmental policy making. From this analysis the book turns its attention to the prospects for achieving sustainable development. The key question here is, 'How far can international action achieve sustainable development and in whose interest is such action taken?' The problem of translating the concept of sustainable development into practical policy and its implementation is considered before, finally, the book speculates on the social changes that are necessary if a sustainable society is to be secured.

Although *EPIC* is designed as a course with integrated components, each of the course books is also freestanding so that it can be read by those who are not taking the course. The three books, both individually and together, are intended to provide a context and body of knowledge of interest and importance to both social and natural scientists and a wider audience beyond.

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