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## The Commission on Sustainable Development: Paper Tiger or Agency to Save the Earth?

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*Martin Khor*

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 raised expectations world-wide that governments had at last begun to take the environment and development crises seriously. True, the Earth Summit had not produced concrete commitments on some of the key issues, such as the transfer of financial resources to countries of the South to help in their transition to sustainable development. But there was at least the recognition by the more than one hundred heads of governments and states who came that the crises did indeed exist, and they signed a number of documents that committed them to take action on a broad range of environmental as well as development problems. Key among these was the *Agenda 21* plan of action containing action proposals on issues ranging from water, agriculture, and toxic wastes to poverty, North–South financial and technology transfers, and the rights of women and indigenous peoples.

The UNCED decided to establish a Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) under the umbrella of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to take charge of monitoring and reviewing the follow-up activities, particularly the implementation of *Agenda 21*. The CSD's overall task is thus enormous: to transform the political rhetoric and the massive plans and proposals of the Rio Summit into concrete and meaningful action, with no less an aim than to ensure the survival of the Earth and its people. Fifty-three countries were later elected to form the intergovernmental component of the CSD, with Malaysia's ambassador Razali Ismail the first chairman.

Almost exactly a year after the Rio Summit the CSD held its first substantive session in New York on 14–25 June. Compared to the hectic and often exciting schedule during the UNCED process (including the four preparatory committee meetings and the Summit itself), this first session of the CSD was an anticlimax. At the UNCED meetings there was usually a sense of urgency and comprehensiveness, with several official working-groups meeting simultaneously to discuss a wide range of important issues. Participants, whether government officials or non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, were drawn into thrashing out differing positions and coming up with action plans on forests, water resources, sustainable agriculture, hazardous substances, air pollution, health, habitat, consumption

patterns, poverty, international trade and financial relations, and many other issues. In contrast, the CSD session was leisurely in pace, with little discussion on action to solve specific environmental or development problems. The focus was mainly on procedural and organizational matters, such as the setting-up of an agenda for similar CSD sessions in the next few years, agreeing on a system by which governments report on how they have followed up on their UNCED commitments, and the establishment of working-groups on finance and technology issues that would meet in between the annual CSD sessions.

Perhaps this preoccupation with procedural arrangements, and neglect of substantive issues, was to some extent unavoidable and understandable. To carry out the enormous work of reviewing and initiating the implementation of the UNCED action plans, the CSD Secretariat would surely require significant manpower and financial resources. Yet by the time of the CSD session, a full year after the Rio Summit, the Secretariat had only a handful of staff, and some of these had been 'borrowed' from other departments. During the CSD session there was difficulty on some days to secure enough rooms for the meetings. The United Nations has been undergoing a restructuring exercise, and it was not clear to what extent the CSD Secretariat would be allocated the resources it would need. It is also true that before it can move into action, the governments that form the CSD had to first agree on its work schedule and work style, hence the need for the prior focus on settling procedural matters.

Whilst allowance can be made for such 'teething' problems, it was still a great disappointment to NGO participants (and to several government delegations as well) that so little of substance had been accomplished in the year after the Rio Summit. As one of the environment ministers present lamented, the state of the world's environment had continued to deteriorate despite the fine words spoken and the pledges made at Rio, and the momentum for redressing the problems had actually slowed down considerably. This raises the question of whether the CSD will be adequate to its given task of organizing or providing direction to *Agenda 21*'s implementation.

### Deterioration in the Economic Situation since Rio

There was an even more important reason for the sense of anticlimax at the CSD session. It was clear to all participants that whilst there was a lack of forward movement generally since Rio, the situation had actually worsened in the most crucial area of all: the provision of financial resources for the South's transition to sustainable development. The Northern countries as a whole had not only failed to increase their development assistance (as promised)—many among them had actually decreased their aid budgets. This has had a major impact on the post-UNCED political climate, because aid had assumed a crucial role, both real and symbolic, throughout the UNCED negotiations.

Southern NGOs and their governments had argued that the current world economic order is unequally structured and works against the interests of developing countries. If the ecological crisis requires that there be a global economic adjustment, this should be done in an equitable manner, with the richer North bearing the brunt of the burden, since it has been mainly responsible for resource depletion and pollution. The rich have to do the cutting back so that the poor can have the 'environmental space' to still grow in order to fulfil their human needs. The key to this equitable adjustment is a reform of international economic institutions and a reduction of the present massive outflow of financial resources from the South to the North. An improvement in the terms of trade for the South's exports and a resolution of the debt crisis would be essential as parts of a structural and long-term solution to the South's economic problems, and a condition for the successful transition to sustainable development. However, it became clear in the preparatory committee stage of the UNCED process that the Northern governments were not willing to engage in any serious dialogue on debt relief, the terms of trade, or reforms to global economic structures. The discussion on economic issues therefore narrowed down to how much new aid the North could provide. As the Southern countries as a whole are suffering losses of between US\$200–500 billion a year from the imbalances of the world economy, the current aid flow of about US\$50 billion can only slightly redress the outflows from the South. Moreover, besides the aid volume being too small, much of aid is ineffective in terms of poverty alleviation and a significant proportion is environmentally or socially inappropriate.

Nevertheless, given the Northern refusal to negotiate on fundamental economic issues, aid became the test of the extent of the developed countries' commitment to increase the South's capacity for environmental protection. An adequate increase in aid in particular, and in financial resources to the South in general, became the most complex and crucial of UNCED's issues and formed the core of the North–South bargain struck in Rio.

The UNCED secretariat had estimated that an extra US\$125

billion in aid or other external resources was required by the Southern countries to augment three times that amount as the total cost of their implementing *Agenda 21*. This figure was considered much too extreme by Northern governments, but the South still expected some firm commitments for substantial aid increases. In the event, there was deep disappointment at Rio on the part of Southern governments when the North as a whole would not agree to give concrete commitments in terms of the volume of aid within a specified target year. As finally stated in *Agenda 21*'s chapter on financial resources, the Northern governments agreed to reaffirm their commitments to reach the UN target of 0.7 per cent of Gross National Product (GNP) for aid.<sup>1</sup> As most developed countries had not been meeting this target, the reaffirmation, without giving a specific period for meeting the target, did not constitute a real commitment. However, *Agenda 21* added that some countries (it was not specified which ones) agreed to reach the target by the year 2000. Those countries that had already reached the target were encouraged to contribute to the additional resources needed. Others agreed to make their 'best efforts to increase their level of official development assistance'.

If the outcome on finance at Rio was disappointing, at least there was some understanding that a new North–South economic partnership was needed to solve the many global environmental problems that the UNCED process had highlighted. But in the year since Rio the aid situation has turned from disappointing to alarming. Many Northern governments, including those that traditionally have been more sympathetic to the South, have announced reductions in their aid budgets. The CSD secretariat issued a paper for the June session that put the situation bluntly: 'The outlook for the growth of aid from industrialized countries is bleak.' Despite increased aid-demand arising from UNCED, many bilateral donors had cut back their aid programmes in response to budgetary pressures and this, the paper said, had caused a further shortfall from the aid target of 0.7 per cent of GNP.<sup>2</sup> 'Amid current trends there is no real prospect that the target will be reached in a reasonable period.' The paper added that many low- and lower-middle-income countries still have an unsustainable debt burden requiring additional debt relief measures, and that UN agencies are being given increasing mandates but their resources are stagnating, making their functioning increasingly difficult.

A major study on aid trends published in mid-June by two Northern associations of development organizations, Eurostep<sup>3</sup> and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, has reached the following alarming conclusions:

- there is a widespread decline in aid. Aid from a majority of donor countries is expected to fall, with only a few expected to maintain their previous levels;

- there is an increasing diversion of shrinking aid budgets away from long-term development to emergency assistance and away from Africa to Eastern and Central Europe;
- despite the rhetoric of helping to alleviate poverty, aid is still overwhelmingly not devoted to the needs of the poor. Only around 10 per cent of total aid is actually directed at reducing poverty;
- there is continuing use of aid to promote exports from the rich countries and commercial pressures on the administration of aid is increasing.

The bleak realities and prospects on aid cast a long shadow over the CSD session. The chairman of the Group of 77 (G77), the umbrella body of developing countries, Colombian ambassador Luis Fernando Jaramillo, expressed 'frustration and disappointment' at the post-Rio situation relating to financial resources. Several other Southern country delegations also spoke up in a similar vein, whilst privately many officials were expressing cynicism and doubts over the sincerity of the North in wanting an equitable implementation of the UNCED agreements. The deterioration in the aid-and-finance position was the single most important factor that dampened the overall atmosphere at the CSD session.

After financial resources, the issue that had been of most interest to Southern governments at UNCED was the transfer of environmentally sound technology. They had persuaded the Northern countries to accept the principle that such technology transfer to the South was crucial for a transition to sustainable development. However, whilst agreeing that concessional terms should be encouraged for the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, the Northern governments insisted that intellectual property rights (such as patents) be applied on such technologies. The *Agenda 21* chapter on technology calls for action to promote and finance the access to and transfer of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable (including concessional and preferential) terms.<sup>4</sup> But it also says that these terms must be 'mutually agreed' upon and must also take into account the need to protect intellectual property rights. The full application of such rights would of course be a major barrier to technology transfer, and would deprive the commitment to transfer technology of much of its content. There is thus a fundamental tension within the agreement on technology, and room for more discussion on how to operationalize the *Agenda 21* proposals on technology co-operation, transfer, and capacity building. The Southern countries consider this to be an area where assistance from the North is critically needed, and at the CSD session the only two substantive issues that were discussed were financial resources and technology transfer. It must also be noted that in the year after the Rio Summit there had also been no

progress on facilitating the transfer of environmentally sound technology to the South, and this lack of movement added to the pessimistic mood at the CSD meeting.

### Thematic Work Programme and Reporting System

A key question to resolve was the manner by which the CSD would operate, and in particular, how and when it would follow up on the many various issues in the forty chapters of *Agenda 21*. Some NGOs had favoured a CSD with a strong secretariat that could service the taking of initiatives on the broad spectrum of *Agenda 21* issues simultaneously. Working-groups on clusters of issues could be set up which could get to work immediately and continuously throughout the year, otherwise most activities would only be focused on the annual two-week sessions of the CSD. The working-groups could comprise governments, with participation given to relevant NGOs, and technical support provided by the Secretariat. The UN Commission on Human Rights was often cited by NGOs as a possible model to follow. Unfortunately this 'activist' mode of operation was not adopted. In general, governments were wary of the development of a powerful CSD that could exert discipline over them. Some Southern governments were worried that they might be coerced into taking environmental measures that would curb their development; and some Northern governments were concerned that another UN bureaucracy would be built up to discuss again the development and North-South economic issues that preoccupy the South. Moreover, given the inadequate resources provided to the CSD Secretariat, and the lack of Northern government interest in increasing the UN budget, it would at this stage have been administratively difficult for an activist CSD to be serviced.

In the end, the CSD session adopted a 'multi-year thematic programme of work', in which certain key issues (in particular, financial resources and technology transfer) would be discussed every year at future CSD annual sessions, whilst other clusters of issues would be discussed on a rotation basis, with each cluster coming up once and the cycle being completed by 1996. Thus, two clusters would be discussed in 1994 (health, human settlements, and fresh-water; toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes); one in 1995 (land, desertification, forests, and biodiversity); and one in 1996 (atmosphere, oceans, and all kinds of seas). In addition, various aspects of 'cross-sectoral issues' (or issues that cut across various specific subjects) would be on the agenda on different years: finance and technology for all years; international economic co-operation, consumption patterns, capacity-building in the South, international institutions, and international legal instruments in 1994; poverty, population, biotechnology, science, integration of environment and development, and the role of major groups in 1995; and

education and capacity building in 1996. In 1997 the CSD session will conduct an overall review and appraisal of *Agenda 21* in preparation for a special session of the General Assembly in 1997 (agreed to during the Rio Summit) which will assess the implementation of *Agenda 21*. In addition, the CSD may also take up any emerging issue in any other chapter even if it is not scheduled for the year, if the circumstances so require. The secretariat will also prepare a paper on urgent and emerging major issues for consideration of the high-level part of annual CSD meetings, which are attended by ministers.

With such a wide array of issues to be considered, two questions arise. First, even with the division of the issues into a three-year agenda, it will be impossible for an annual two-week session of the CSD to do justice to the many topics coming up for discussion, especially since there have not been working-groups already dealing with these topics on a continuous basis. Thus the CSD sessions face the danger of being able only to superficially handle the issues, or of reaffirming resolutions already passed in *Agenda 21* or elsewhere, without having the capacity to organize their concrete implementation. Secondly, since issues are to be discussed on a rotation basis, then it may take another two or three years before an urgent problem gets on to the agenda for consideration. For example, the critical issues of poverty and of the role of major groups (including farmers, workers, and indigenous people) will be on the agenda only in 1995, a full three years after the Rio Summit; whilst the problem of oceans, seas, and coastal resources will get a first hearing in 1996, four years after Rio. True, there are other fora in which some of the key issues are already being dealt with, such as the Conventions on Biodiversity, Climate Change, and Desertification. However, there are several other issues that are not located in other fora, and even if some are being dealt with by certain UN agencies, they need to be discussed within the environment-and-development context of the UNCED process, which the CSD is meant to provide.

Another issue relating to work methodology that the 1993 CSD session discussed was the way governments and other agencies would report on the progress of their activities and policies following up on *Agenda 21* and on the move towards sustainable development in general. The main tension in the discussions of this issue was between the acknowledged need for some international mechanism (the CSD) to monitor progress (or the lack of it) at national level, and the fear of governments that their national sovereignty would be impinged upon through internationally sanctioned disciplines. Another key aspect was how to make the international financial and economic institutions (in particular the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) more accountable to a representative body such as the CSD (and, by extrapolation, the UN General Assembly).

The CSD eventually agreed that governments should provide, on a voluntary basis, information in the form of national reports regarding activities undertaken to implement *Agenda 21*, the problems they face (such as in relation to financial resources and technology transfer), and other environment-and-development issues they find relevant. The national reports will be sent to the CSD secretariat, which will then prepare analytical reports for the CSD sessions, including an annual overview report on progress made in implementing *Agenda 21*, and thematic reports corresponding to the issues on the agendas of forthcoming Commission sessions. The following general guide-lines were agreed upon for inclusion in the secretariat's analytical reports and for the information that governments would provide:

- policies and measures at national level to meet *Agenda 21* objectives, including national sustainable-development strategies and major activities and projects undertaken;
- institutional mechanisms to address sustainable-development issues, including the participation of NGOs and major groups in these mechanisms;
- assessments of progress achieved to date, with statistical sheets and tables;
- measures taken and progress achieved to reach sustainable production and consumption patterns and life-styles, to combat poverty, and limit demographic impact on the planet's life-supporting capacity;
- the impact of the environmental measures undertaken on the national economy, including the social impact of such measures;
- experiences gained, for example, descriptions of successful policies and projects that can serve as models, and particularly strategies that improve both social conditions and environmental sustainability;
- specific problems and constraints encountered, including those related to finance and technology and to the adverse impact of economic and trade policies and measures, particularly on developing countries;
- the adverse impact on sustainable development of trade-restrictive and distortive policies and measures, and progress in making trade and environment policies mutually supportive in favour of sustainable development;
- assessments of capacity, or the availability of domestic human, technological, and financial resources;
- assessments of needs and priorities for external assistance in finance, technology transfer, co-operation, and capacity building, and human-resource development;
- implementation of *Agenda 21* commitments related to finance (including the 07 per cent of GNP aid target) and to technology transfer, co-operation, and capacity building;

- assessments of the effectiveness of activities and projects of international organizations, including international financial institutions and funding mechanisms;
- other environment-and-development issues, including those affecting youth, women, and other major groups.

The agreement on reporting systems can be considered significant, as it moves the *Agenda 21* one step forward from the resolution stage towards accountability on follow-up activities. First, it means that governments will have to prepare reports on their national policies and measures on environment and development, for the consideration of the CSD Secretariat and thus for other governments, NGOs, and the public as well. Although the information is to be provided on a voluntary basis (thus avoiding the infringement of national sovereignty), governments will feel obliged to comply as far as possible to the guide-lines. And since the various national reports will be subjected to comparison, governments will also feel the pressure to carry out policy changes and activities promoting sustainable development. Secondly, the onus will be not only on the Southern governments to show progress on the environment front, but also on the Northern governments to report on their efforts in changing unsustainable production and consumption patterns and life-styles. Thirdly, the reports will cover North-South development issues, obtaining information from developing countries on the constraints (including lack of finance and technical know-how) they face, and from developed countries on how far they have fulfilled commitments in providing financial and technical aid to the South. The North may thus be made more accountable in terms of its commitments on aid and international economic co-operation. Fourthly, the interlinkages between trade and environment are also to be covered, and thus the CSD may become a useful forum for clarifying this complex relationship. Fifthly, intergovernmental organizations within and outside the UN system are also asked to prepare reports on their UNCED follow-up activities, and the CSD secretariat is asked to assess the effectiveness of their activities. The policies and activities of the international financial institutions and the Global Environment Facility are to be included in this review. The policies and activities of these international agencies would thus be made more accountable. And finally, the Secretariat's analytical reports are meant to provide an overview of the overall progress in the implementation of *Agenda 21* at national, regional, and international levels, as well as progress in specific sectoral areas. This should thus be able to provide information by which the public can judge how far the grand plans of UNCED are being fulfilled by governments and international agencies.

Whilst the framework for monitoring information and for analysing results has been agreed to, and this is a necessary

measure to move *Agenda 21* from paper to action, the question of course remains whether there will be much progress to report upon. If in the end there is little meaningful action at the national level, and little or no progress in co-operation at the international level, then the reports, if they are accurate, will only make gloomy reading. Future CSD sessions would then be lacklustre affairs, similar in mood to that of the 1993 session, dampened by the dismal aid performance of the North.

### The Establishment of Working-Groups on Finance and Technology

From the viewpoint of moving the post-UNCED negotiations on *Agenda 21* forward, the most significant development at the CSD session was the establishment of working-groups on what were almost unanimously agreed by governments to be the two most important issues, financial resources, and technology transfer and co-operation. Although there were only two such groups created, a precedent was thus set, and it is possible that other groups could be established in future.

Southern delegations at the session had pressed for the two groups to be set up, so that a start could be made to what would amount to North-South negotiations on these issues before the next CSD session. Their argument was that the availability of financial resources and access to environmentally sound technology were preconditions and the means to implementing *Agenda 21*, and thus these were the most important topics requiring the special attention of working-groups.

The activities of the working-groups are meant to keep the Commission's intergovernmental discussions alive between the annual sessions. Opinion is split on how effective these groups are going to be. Many official delegates, as well as NGO representatives, fear that the working-groups will eventually become merely 'talk-shops' with Southern and Northern delegations or their experts making their respective speeches about aid and technology transfer, repeating positions already made at other fora such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Others think that the CSD Bureau (the steering-group of governments that oversee the Commission), which is charged with co-ordinating the work of the two groups, may have an opportunity to catalyse new movement in these two areas which have traditionally been at the centre of North-South discussions. The challenge is for the bureau and the working-groups to be 'lean' and flexible enough to get a real dialogue between North and South going, whilst at the same time allowing for enough participation and transparency to get the agreement and support of all CSD member governments. If this fine balance is attained, it could rekindle elements of the North-

South dialogue that had showed promise in the 1970s. If not, the working-groups may end up only as new fora repeating the same discussions already taking place at UNCTAD and the Second Committee of the ECOSOC.

The working-group on financial matters will comprise governments which are to nominate experts to assist the Commission to:

- monitor and review requirements, availability, and adequacy of financial resources to implement the different clusters of *Agenda 21* so as to provide a common basis for actions by governments and funding agencies;
- monitor and analyse various factors that influence the flow of financial and economic resources, such as debt relief, terms of trade, commodity prices, market access, and foreign investment as well as to review innovative financing;
- develop a policy framework for mobilizing financial resources towards a balanced implementation of all aspects of *Agenda 21* that would assist governments to implement their sustainable development strategies.

To assist in the monitoring, donor countries were asked by the CSD to provide information on the extent to which their commitments on financial matters as contained in *Agenda 21* had been achieved, including aid as a percentage of GNP, debt relief, aid priorities, funding arrangements related to sustainable development, and specific support for environmental conventions.

Whilst the working-group on financial matters is to have an indefinite life-span, that on technology transfer will operate for a trial period of one year only. This was a compromise agreement as opinion among Commission members was split on whether it was necessary even to establish the technology group. Several Northern countries expressed reservations about establishing another group, as they felt this would overburden the resources of governments and the UN system. Many developing countries, however, spoke up in favour, with South Korea in particular making a passionate plea. Its delegate said that although technology transfer was one of the most crucial issues at the Rio Summit, there had been no progress in this field at all. There was no other forum but the CSD, he said, that could get action going; thus, the proposed working-group would not duplicate other efforts and there was a need to start action now and not await another year. This argument carried the day, at least half-way, with the European Community and the United States proposing the group be set up with an initial life-span of one year, after which a review would be made to decide on whether to extend its life.

As with the finance group, the working-group on techno-

logy transfer, co-operation, and capacity building will be composed of governments that will nominate experts. It is meant to assist in assessing and suggesting specific measures to support and promote access to and transfer of environmentally sound technology as indicated in *Agenda 21*, and to develop the policy framework to facilitate, promote, and finance technology transfer.

The Commission also adopted resolutions urging governments to help developing countries to get access to environmentally sound technologies through easier terms of transfer and the building up of their own capacities to develop and manage these technologies. It also called for the establishment of a network of national, regional, and international research and information systems enabling developing countries to have access to information at low cost, and for the setting-up of environmental technology centres at different levels.

A number of NGOs argued that perhaps even more important than technology transfer was the need to assess which technologies are worth transferring, and which should be weeded out because of their negative environmental and social effects. They raised fears that under the guise of transferring 'environmentally sound technologies', companies and Northern governments would export hazardous technologies to unsuspecting Southern countries, perhaps even through aid programmes. The NGOs succeeded in getting their message across, and one of the resolutions in the technology document approved by the CSD stated that the Commission

also recognized that in addition to promoting the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, the Commission should also promote both the development of methodologies for and the assessment of the environmental, health, safety and social impacts of technologies. In this context, national and international measures should be strengthened to promote information exchange on and discourage the transfer of activities that employ hazardous technologies which are not used and/or are prohibited in developed countries.

The UN was also asked to designate a focal point for technology assessment to serve as a clearing-house for information and referrals.

An innovation, at least where the UN system is concerned, is that both the working-groups will be initiated and co-ordinated by the Bureau of the CSD comprising officials of governments, instead of the secretariat composed of UN bureaucrats. Thus the groups are meant to be politically rather than bureaucratically driven, and there is much scope thus given to the Bureau to initiate North-South co-operation. It is also likely that if these two working-groups perform well other groups will be formed to initiate action on sectoral issues such as water resources, health, and toxic wastes.

### Change of Heart by the United States?

Perhaps the most significant development at the CSD session was the apparent change in the position of the United States. The Clinton administration took the opportunity to demonstrate that, with the change-over from George Bush, the USA was now willing to join other nations in the cause of sustainable development.

At the Rio Summit the US delegation, led by President Bush, was seen as the villain, dampening the efforts of other countries and lowering the standards that might otherwise have been reached in several areas of negotiations. Among other things, the United States had prevented the Climate Convention from having targets for greenhouse-gas emissions, had refused to consider stronger multilateral legislation to control the export of toxic substances and wastes, had championed corporate interests by promoting intellectual property rights at the expense of technology transfer to the South, had refused to sign the Biodiversity Convention, and alone among developed countries had refused to accept (even in principle) the long-standing UN aid target of 0.7 per cent of GNP.

The apparent change of heart began at the CSD session's opening session itself, with a rousing speech by the US vice-president, Al Gore. Tim Wirth, the US State Department counsellor and head of delegation, speaking at the end of the two-day ministerial part of the session, pledged partnership with the South and offered to take joint initiatives with the Group of 77 on technology transfer. The depressive gloom that the United States had spread across the UNCED process all the way to Rio was thus lifted at the CSD meeting. But at the end participants were still wondering whether there had been a genuine change of heart, or if the basic policies of the United States would remain, hidden perhaps behind the new and better rhetoric (which was certainly impressive).

In his speech Gore took pains to signal a shift in the US position in global environment negotiations. He began his long address by invoking the spirit and 'riches of human creativity' that he himself had witnessed at Rio, and stressed that the planet was in serious crisis which required urgent action to rectify. He gave three examples of how the Clinton administration intended to be different: the United States had now signed the Biodiversity Convention; Clinton had committed the United States to keep to 1990 levels of greenhouse-gas emissions by the year 2000 (Bush had refused to set targets); and a Presidential Council on Sustainable Development had been formed with twenty-five members from government, industry, and environmental NGOs. Gore dwelt at length on the problems caused by rapid population-growth, but surprised his audience by adding: 'Sometimes developing countries feel that population is an issue used by rich countries to try and clamp on their growth. Sometimes developing countries are right. We in the rich countries have

less than a quarter of the world's population but we use three-quarters of its raw materials and create three-quarters of its solid wastes. An American child has 30 times more impact than an Indian child on the Earth's environment.' He concluded that the rich countries put a disproportionately greater strain on the world's environment and thus should have a bigger role in solving environmental problems, something that the Bush administration had clearly avoided admitting. Gore also spelt out two principles needed to operationalize 'sustainable development': national responsibility (with each country having to commit itself to changing its own national policies) and North-South partnership. He pledged that the United States was committed to both principles.

The strong advocacy orientation adopted by Gore was met positively by official delegates, NGO representatives, and UN officials who in general were relieved that the United States might in future no longer play the 'spoiler's game', dragging negotiations down with its reluctance to give way on many issues. But the optimism was also tinged with doubts. As one environmental NGO representative put it: 'Is it the Clinton administration's view or Gore's own view? How much power does Gore command to change things around?' A senior Third World diplomat offered this view: 'The speech is fine but there is still no financial commitment to back it up.'

Throughout the following fortnight of discussions, although the US delegation did not take a leading role in making new offers or proposals, neither did it distinguish itself (as at previous UNCED meetings) by taking hard-line positions against the current. Near the end of the session Tim Wirth reaffirmed his government's 'resounding and deep support' for the CSD and said that the United States was joining Colombia (which currently holds the position of chairman of the G77) to prepare for the working-group on technology transfer. The change from the confrontational stance that had marked many US positions and interventions previously helped engender a greater sense of co-operation at the CSD session. However, it remains to be seen how far these expressions of goodwill can or will be translated into actions. There was suspicion amongst some that the change was one of tone and language but so far not of substance, and that the 'technology co-operation' pledged was essentially a promise of co-operation to talk about talks, and a method to promote trade in environmental technology. Given the past US record, and the entrenched power of its corporate and bureaucratic establishment, real and drastic changes will be required to translate the rhetoric of goodwill into new policy directions.

## Reaching the Limits of Global Talks?

The general disappointment on the slow pace of progress since the Rio Summit was felt not only by NGO representatives at the CSD session. At the two-day ministerial meeting near the end of the session, many of the environment ministers present lamented the lack of follow-up to UNCED. CSD chairman Razali Ismail ran the meeting in a manner that was innovative for a UN ministerial session. Participants were asked not to make set-piece speeches but to have an open and free exchange; as a result, the discussions were more direct and frank than the normal diplomatic and cautious UN style. Perhaps this was why the political leaders were able to be sharp in their criticisms of the post-Rio inertia.

The Danish environment minister said that progress since Rio had been depressingly slow, and it was time to tell the truth: 'We are not moving in the right direction but the wrong one. The environment situation now is worse than a year ago at Rio and next year it will be worse. Things can get worse before they get even worse . . . Half truths won't work. We should tell the world how serious the situation is.'

The Australian environment minister, Ros Kelly, in equally frank terms, said that there was a growing sense of disillusionment that the political commitment at Rio had been lost in a bureaucratic maze and rhetoric. Environment concerns had 'gone off the boil' in the past year as wars and recession received more attention. She added that political commitment and leadership were required and that ministers must keep involved in the UNCED follow-up process, or else the environment would return to being treated with low priority and 'goodness knows what will happen to our next generation'. Speaking on behalf of the G77 countries and China, the Colombian agriculture minister José Gaviria said that most developing countries had been frustrated at Rio over the lack of funding commitments and one year later the situation had even worsened. Aid had fallen, barriers to technology transfer remained, poverty and terms of trade had worsened. Norway's environment minister Thorbjørn Berntsen called for greater equity between North and South as the widening gaps between rich and poor and between environmental problems and their solutions were alarming. A business-as-usual approach was not enough to turn the tide of the crisis. The unsustainable life-styles of the rich should be checked, he said: 'Our consumption patterns, and our efforts to multiply them worldwide, will undermine the environmental resource base even if we were to introduce the best available technology worldwide. I am convinced without real change in our consumption patterns we will not be able to reach the goals in the climate and biodiversity conventions, nor will we effectively fight poverty.'

These examples show that political leaders (at least those involved in environmental matters) are aware not only of the deteriorating situation, but that public disillusionment has set

in over what was actually achieved in Rio and the lack of follow-up activities or results. Thus there is the danger that the public interest generated through the UNCED process may soon subside to a point from where it would be difficult to revive it. It could well be the case that the apparent post-Rio inertia was to some extent unavoidable. The UNCED process was such a huge undertaking that some time was required for the organizers and even the participants to 'recover' from it. The administrative framework for follow-up needed time to establish. The UN Secretariat was going through a major reorganization, partly to incorporate the post-UNCED activities into its structure. The modalities of work-procedures, methodologies, and programmes for the CSD and for other institutions involved in the follow-up had to be worked out, and then agreed to by governments. Perhaps a year is not too long for such practical arrangements, and it is too soon for disillusionment.

However, beyond these understandable administrative requirements, there may also be more deep-rooted reasons for the lack of action since the Rio Summit. The UNCED process had a clear task: to produce documents reflecting the many environment-and-development problems and plans of action to counter them, as agreed to after long negotiations by governments. Drawing up action plans, however complex, is much easier than implementing them. If, at the stage when the plans were being thrashed out, there were already clear signs of fundamental differences between nations (particularly on North-South lines), then these differences are also bound to emerge, more clearly still, at the stage where implementation has to be done. The post-Rio lack of action, therefore, also shows up the obstacles to effective international-level solutions to the crises.

First among these obstacles is the lack of political will. As the Australian minister correctly pointed out, what has been most lacking, and will be most required, is political leadership. Without the right political direction from the capitals, the CSD will not be able to move beyond providing yet another forum to express and lay bare the political realities of international relations. It will not be able to develop into an institution promoting the kinds of changes required to reduce the rate of growth of the environment-and-development crises, let alone overcoming these crises. Although the CSD ministerial meeting was attended by many ministers who spoke passionately about the need for real changes and for political direction, most of them are in charge of environment ministries whose views and budgets are generally given low priority compared to trade, commerce, and economics ministries. These are the ministries that are most closely linked to the dominant economic structures and institutions that are, to a large extent, responsible for environmental problems.

The strong business lobbies that exist across the world are,

by and large, against the drastic changes required in the transition to sustainability, as they fear their financial interests will be affected. Indeed, counter to the trend of rising environmental consciousness and to the public calls for greater scrutiny and accountability of corporations, the transnational companies have been actively lobbying for the dismantling or loosening of international and national regulations and mechanisms relating to corporate behaviour. The UN Centre on Transnational Corporations has been basically dismantled, and its efforts to promote a Code of Conduct for Transnational Corporations are in shambles. Through the Uruguay Round negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Northern governments influenced by their corporations are proposing to reduce drastically the rights and ability of governments everywhere to regulate various aspects of company behaviour. In the *Agenda 21* document itself there is a conspicuous absence of action proposals to make corporations and businesses more environmentally or socially accountable. The corporate lobbies are generally against multilateral arrangements that promote basic economic and social changes in favour of the environment, and their efforts to counter such arrangements probably constitute the greatest obstacle to international solutions.

The seemingly insurmountable North-South divide is another blockage to further movement in international negotiations. To a large extent the continuation of this cleavage is due to the refusal of the developed countries to respond to the South's call for reforms to reduce the serious and growing inequities in the international economic and financial system. The most important attempt at such reforms was the move, sanctioned by the UN General Assembly, to establish a New International Economic Order in the 1970s. This, and similar efforts for North-South dialogue, collapsed in the 1980s with the rise of aggressive conservative forces led by the former US and UK leaders, President Reagan and Premier Thatcher. Since the inequities have worsened, the need for reforms is even more pressing. Southern governments have argued that these reforms, or at least reductions in the South-to-North flow of resources, are a prerequisite for a successful transition to sustainable development in their countries. These countries feel that global environment measures imposed on them by Northern interests, without accompanying changes in the world economic system, would be detrimental to their interests. As long as these understandable (and to a large extent justifiable) suspicions remain, Southern governments may use the principle of national sovereignty to resist those environmental measures or actions that they perceive might threaten their development prospects or which weaken their position further in the international economy. A revival of interest by the North in a dialogue for North-South co-operation towards internatio-

nal economic reforms is thus important to generate the goodwill needed for international environmental co-operation.

On the political front, many Southern governments are also dismayed at events in recent years. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc, and the rise of a unipolar world order, there is the perception that the West, and the United States in particular, is able to impose its will to further its interests. They fear that the Security Council of the UN is being used by the major powers to legitimize their military and other actions. The practice of double standards in international affairs (for instance, the lack of military intervention in Bosnia against the Serbs in contrast to the brutal punishment of Iraq for invading Kuwait) has weakened the confidence of many Third World countries in the way the West conducts international relations. The increasing use of conditionalities (structural adjustment, human rights, labour standards, and so on) for bilateral aid, World Bank loans, and as instruments in trade relations has also raised fears among countries of the South that the environment will be used as yet another weapon in favour of the North in international economic relations. This adds to the suspicions and reduces the degree of goodwill during international environmental discussions.

The perception that the North is not willing to put its own environmental house in order, but instead wants to push the burden of adjustment on to the South, is another obstacle. As Al Gore has recognized, the North is responsible for an overwhelming share of the world's environmental stress and should therefore institute national policies to clean up its act. A reduction in wastage of resources, cutbacks in consumption, and a change in life-styles are in order nationally, whilst internationally a commitment to transfer a part of the resources saved to the South is needed.

Without the Northern governments leading by example, they would not have earned the moral right to preach to others about the global environment. Unfortunately, the preoccupation with economic recession and budgetary problems has placed reforms to reduce environmental stress lower on Northern governments' agendas. Thus the perception that the North is not really serious about the environment is bound to grow.

The lack of resources at the UN is also an obstacle to the CSD's ability to play its full potential role. Given the enormity of the CSD's mandated task, it would require a strong professional team as secretariat. However, the UN Secretariat is facing a financial crisis, and due mainly to pressures from Northern governments its priorities have shifted to Security Council-related peace-keeping efforts whilst its role in social and economic affairs has been downgraded. The Northern governments have decided that the right fora for conducting international economic and social affairs are the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and

Trade) which they are able to control; the UN agencies and Secretariat departments dealing with these issues are accordingly to be reduced in stature. Thus, whilst the UN and its agencies are asked to trim expenses, and new initiatives, even on the environment, are usually met with the response: 'We don't want to create a new bureaucracy', the World Bank has rapidly expanded its environment department and the North is proposing to expand the role of GATT dramatically. Within the UN, activities relating to sustainable development may have received a boost from UNCED, and within the social and economic sphere it has been accorded a high priority. However, the general shortage of funds and manpower are also putting a constraint on the capacity of the UN Secretariat and agencies to promote environment-and-development measures, whether through the CSD or other institutions.

### Future Prospects

Despite the formidable obstacles, there is no alternative but to continue to seek international co-operation, even as each country has also to focus primarily on its own national actions for environmental protection. Although the official post-Rio action has been slow and little, there are some positive signs arising from the CSD session.

First, the apparent change in the US approach could mean the breaking down of a major barrier to international environmental co-operation. If the spirit of Vice-President Gore's words could be transformed into practical policy changes, then the United States could even take a leading role in initiating North-South discussions on both the environment and development. Of course, the strength of entrenched business interests will, in all probability, assert itself and try to prevent real policy changes. This will put the Clinton administration's professed commitment to the environment and to North-South partnership to the test. But at least there is a chance now to move forward from the aggressive conservatism of the Reagan-Bush era.

Secondly, now that the administrative and procedural framework has been settled, the CSD can get on with tackling the substantive issues. The two working-groups set up on financial matters and technology transfer and co-operation can be seen as experiments in moving North-South negotiations into smaller, more manageable groups, with a greater chance for frank dialogue. Of course the degree to which the working-groups will bring concrete results will depend mainly on the political will of respective governments. No amount of diplomatic or intellectual skills will come to much unless there is a change of heart in the political capitals. At the least, however, a new forum for a working dialogue has been created, one in which both North and South can claim an interest because for the first time the economic

interests of the South are being linked to the need of both North and South to resolve environmental problems. The CSD itself has become perhaps the most important UN forum in which the North is interested to forge North-South co-operation, because that is crucial for tackling the global ecological crisis which the Northern public is increasingly concerned about. Because the CSD is the premier meeting place that links economics with the environment, the South should find in it its best chance to engage the North in a new North-South development dialogue. Whereas in other fora such as the Bretton Woods institutions the South is pressurized to show results (otherwise the loans or debt-rescheduling schemes will not be forthcoming), the CSD will hold both the North and the South accountable. The reporting systems agreed to at the CSD session call on Northern countries to show how much progress is being made on altering production and consumption patterns and life-styles, and on meeting its aid, financial, and technical co-operation commitments to the South. Governments in general do not like to be compared unfavourably with other countries, and the CSD's analytical reports with comparative data on the performance of different countries may encourage governments to be more serious in their actions towards sustainable development than they would otherwise be.

Another advantage of the CSD is its greater transparency and its relatively friendly approach to NGOs and representatives of groups like indigenous people. During the UNCED process many hundreds of NGOs were accredited and their representatives were able to observe the plenary sessions, speak in them, and meet freely with government delegations. The CSD decided that the same NGOs that had been accredited with UNCED could also gain accreditation with the CSD (thus allowing many more groups entry than would have been the case if the much stricter ECOSOC regulations on NGOs had been applied). The participation rights of the NGOs at the first CSD session were actually enhanced when compared to the UNCED process, thanks largely to the open and liberal attitude of the CSD chairman Razali Ismail, who soon became a popular figure with the NGOs. He allowed NGO participants access not only to the plenary meetings but also to the informal negotiating-group sessions, which have normally been held behind closed doors. NGOs were invited to speak at all sessions, including the ministerial meeting, and sometimes were given precedence over government delegates. Each evening Razali and other members of the CSD Bureau would turn up at a dialogue session with NGOs to discuss the day's proceedings. NGOs were to some extent able to influence their governments to change the text of documents and suggest new points. If the NGOs are also to be treated seriously in future sessions, then the CSD will remain a useful forum for them to get their views heard, to make judgements on the actions (or lack of them)

of the governments in the preceding year, to lobby for better positions and policies, and generally to bring the concerns of the public to the negotiating tables. Indeed, the CSD probably needs the NGOs as much or more than the NGOs need the CSD. The degree to which the CSD develops into an effective body will to a significant extent depend on how seriously the NGOs decide to invest their time and resources to the CSD's activities. Governments took a great interest in UNCED because of the intense focus that the thousands of NGOs and public-interest groups and the media gave to the process and the Summit. If NGOs were to make use of the CSD reports, meetings, and activities to make their governments more accountable, then there would be more pressure felt by the governments to perform more seriously.

The CSD, in short, is a suitable forum for NGOs to catalyse governments towards international co-operation. It also has the possibility of becoming a kind of moral conscience within the UN system to mobilize and organize the energies, resources, and goodwill of political leaders and bureaucrats at national and international levels, for the cause of environmental and social sustainability. It could be a countervailing force, however weak initially, to the trends that support the strengthening of narrow economic interests which in the first place contribute so much to the environment-and-development crises.

That the CSD has an important role in post-UNCED activities is thus not in dispute. The question rather is whether there will in fact be many meaningful activities that it can initiate, and whether it will be permitted to carry out its tasks. The social and economic changes that are required to reverse the negative environmental and development trends are fundamental and drastic. These changes will not come about automatically, and will be resisted by vested interests tied to the present patterns of economy, development, and consumption patterns. Action and solutions at the international level, through bodies like the CSD, can only come about when the political will is built up at the national level. It will require an upsurge in public opinion in both the North and South to move environmental concerns higher up the political order of priorities. Moreover, the Northern public must also become more aware of the need to alter the unequal international economic relations and to revive the North-South dialogue. In the countries of the South, where most governments still think of environmental concerns as being 'anti-development' or even 'anti-government', there is equally the need to raise awareness among both the public and the élite about the importance of environmental protection to the economy, and the necessity to alter development strategies that are socially and environmentally harmful. It is not enough to blame the North for all economic ills, or to excuse lack of action on the environmental front on the ground that the North must change first.

NGOs and social movements thus have to put their primary focus on the national and local battles for environmental protection and socially just approaches to development, and for changes to production and consumption patterns. On these community and national movements will be built the public opinion and political will that can make the required changes possible. Until such changes at national level take place, the CSD and other international fora will have only a small chance of succeeding, because their activities will still be limited to talking and rhetoric, and entrenched interests at home will prevent international co-operation on real action.

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