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Rio+10 – Much Talk, Little Action

The World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September 2002 covered a broad range of subjects, but contentious issues such as trade, energy and climate change were not given the priority some would have wished. Did the Summit nevertheless succeed in covering some new ground on these, or was there a regression compared to earlier political declarations?

It has become fashionable to organise decadal follow-ups to the large world conferences of the 1990s. As the largest of these conferences was the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio in 1992, many people hoped that Rio+10, or the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, would pave the way for a new drive to reconcile environment and development policy. They hoped the WSSD would revive many initiatives taken in Rio that had stalled or were only haltingly creeping forward.

Since the euphoric days of the early 1990s, environment and development policy have suffered severe setbacks. The hopes that the end of the Cold War would lead to an era of peace with peace dividends being ploughed into development and environment protection have evaporated; paradoxically, the feeling of insecurity has grown as the overall level of risk has fallen. Agenda 21, hailed as the blueprint for the 21st century, gathers dust. The multi-billion funds asked for to implement it on a large scale have not materialised. It has not been possible to get agreement on a forest convention; primary forests continue to be cut down at an alarming rate. The institutional weakness of UNEP has not been overcome and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development has become another of those UN bodies that just grind along without actually influencing things. The Kyoto Protocol seen by many as the most remarkable result of global environmental diplomacy has not entered into force after five years of negotiations that have substantially watered down its targets. Environmental awareness continues to exist in the populations of the industrialised countries but environmental protection is no longer considered a first-rate issue. Consumption has continued to grow, fuelled by new appliances and the Internet revolution. Development aid has declined from 0.45% of gross national income in 1989/90 to 0.32% in 1999/2000 with the US almost halving its share. No large-scale success stories of development have materialised in the 1990s; on the contrary, past development success stories like South East Asia have been thrown into economic and social turmoil. Despite globally rising incomes, the income gap between wealthy and impoverished countries continues to widen. Africa and increasingly other parts of the world are being devastated by the scourge of AIDS, that has killed more than 20 million people worldwide in the last 20 years. Finally, the leader of the most powerful nation on earth thinks that coordinated, global environment and development policies do not make sense. He prefers unilateralism.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. Local Agenda 21 processes have mobilised citizens in many municipalities throughout the world. The Global Environment Facility is alive and kicking and has spent over $ 4 billion on greenhouse gas reduction, wetland protection, international waters and the phaseout of ozone-depleting substances; another $ 3 billion have just been pledged for the next four years. Wind energy is expanding more quickly than its most ardent supporters would have thought possible and other renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies have also made astonish-

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ing progress. Policymakers increasingly experiment with efficient policy instruments such as emissions trading. Markets for greenhouse gas reductions are springing up and the US is increasingly isolated in its rejection of the Kyoto Protocol that is now likely to enter into force in 2003. Depletion of the ozone layer has been halted and will be reversed due to a set of international agreements that include institutional and financial arrangements that are highly innovative and effective. Modern communication technologies have helped to spread knowledge rapidly and technological leapfrogging is occurring as the stupendous growth of mobile phone use in developing countries shows. Micro-finance institutions manage to allow poor people to raise capital for successful income generation. And in China hundreds of millions of people continue their march out of poverty.

As usual with world conferences, a large preparatory phase with four preparatory conferences (Prepcoms) preceded the WSSD. Unfortunately, they were not very effective and it soon became clear that no major breakthroughs could be expected from the summit. At Prepcom 3 the US, with Canada, Australia and Saudi Arabia, attempted to re-open old debates tantamount to denying the Agenda 21 as basis. Although on the last three days of Prepcom 4 ministers held round-the-clock discussions on points at issue such as energy, financing, trade and globalisation these remained unsolved and were bracketed in the draft Plan of Implementation. This already was a marked difference to Rio, where the main convention text had already been agreed at the last preparatory conference. Nevertheless, WSSD attendance rivalled UNCED's. 104 Heads of State and Government, more than 9,000 delegates, 8,000 NGOs and 4,000 members of the press gathered for the Summit. The most notable absence was US President Bush. The major formal outcome is the Plan of Implementation (Pol), along with the Political Declaration. No new convention or agreement has been signed. The Pol addresses the following issues:

- other regional initiatives;
- means of implementation;
- institutional framework.

It can clearly be seen that the mix of subjects is very broad and that contentious issues such as trade, energy and climate change have not achieved the status of a chapter. In our article we thus focus on the latter, discussing whether some new ground has been covered or whether we have seen a regression compared to earlier political declarations. Brackets behind quotations denote the paragraph numbers of the Pol.

Trade Policy and Subsidies

Subsidies have been one of the most contentious issues throughout the negotiating process. Despite a discussion going beyond agreed language, in particular the Doha Ministerial Declaration, the Pol merely calls on developed countries “to work towards the objective of duty-free and quota-free access for all least developed countries' exports” (87). It does not go beyond previously agreed text and includes a lot of qualifying terms such as “work towards”, “strongly encourage” or “commit”. The version adopted was the weakest proposal on the table. This was due to the EU declaring that it strongly opposes text on reducing or phasing out environmentally harmful and/or trade-distorting subsidies. This shows that the EU is not always the progressive force that it claims to be. As the US proposed and the EU welcomed, the Pol calls for a completion of the Doha Work Programme (91b). The details are more or less referred to negotiations within the WTO. Its outcome should not be “pre-judged” by commitments of the WSSD (86c).

The relation between WTO rules and environmental agreements led to heated debates. Some states attempted to have the phrase “while ensuring WTO consistency” inserted in a paragraph related to the inter-relatedness of trade, environment and development. Due to heavy lobbying by NGOs and some countries such as Norway, the phrase was deleted and the remaining text referred to “the mutual supportiveness of trade, environment and development” i.e. no hierarchy exists that would allow trade agreements to precede environmental or social agreements.

Social standards created less struggle than at past conferences. The G-77/China proposed inserting “respecting principles and rights established in the ILO conventions adopted or ratified by States” instead of

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