

Report on “The Future of the Commission on Sustainable Development”

A side event convened by Stakeholder Forum at the
57th session of the United Nations General Assembly
Thursday 14th November 2002

Background

The future of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) will be the subject of much debate over the coming months as we come out of the Johannesburg Summit. There are a number of issues up for the offing – Can it become a more effective body in terms of mobilizing implementation of sustainable development? How can stakeholders be more effectively involved and listened to in the process? Do governments really want it to focus more on implementation of sustainable development? How will the Type II partnerships be supported and reviewed in the years ahead? What policy tools and options are available to help enhance all of these areas?

A side event was convened by Stakeholder Forum to help kick off the debate about the future of the CSD. The event was held during the 57th session of UN General Assembly and during the follow-up discussion about the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The event included presentations from different governments about the CSD’s future and Stakeholder Forum presented a summary of a new paper outlining some of the current options for CSD reform.

The event was facilitated by Stakeholder Forum’s new chair David Hales. The speakers included: Jonathon Margolis (US State department); Desighen Naidoo; (Dept. for Environmental Affairs and Tourism, South Africa); I Gede Ngurah Swajaya (Permanent Mission of Indonesia); Minu Hemmati and Rosalie Gardiner (Stakeholder Forum).

Presentations

Rosalie Gardiner began the event outlining some of the key proposals in Stakeholder Forum’s new briefing paper “Post Johannesburg. The future of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development” (CSD). She pointed out that the key point of the discussion should not be about reform of the CSD for its own sake but rather to consider how to make the CSD contribute more effectively to real and positive outcomes for sustainable development. She noted that there is a small “window of opportunity” over the next four – six months to try and look at some these options about what “in an ideal world” the CSD could become. In addition she noted that there are a number of issues that may be “ripe” for making further progress in terms of implementation e.g. WEHAB issues, and that governments should consult with their stakeholders to agree together which issues these should be.

Jonathon Margolis followed by noting that the CSD is facing a “crisis of relevance”. He asked “Does it have any relevance to what people are actually doing back at home?” - “Not at the moment” was his own view. He felt, that despite the agreement at Johannesburg that the CSD should have an official meeting on a biannual basis, governments should also be taking an active role and meeting every year about sustainable development issues but in a non-traditional format and carrying out different tasks. “We need to be moving beyond negotiations” he stated, “the multi-stakeholder processes should become not merely single day events but should become the entire

focus of the process. Governments should only come in where it is necessary to agree new policy norms and processes.” The key questions, he felt, included:

1. How to get stakeholders to actively participate in the process?
2. What would be the subject matter? We could try to cover everything but it would be better to focus down – WEHAB (Water, Agenda, Health, Agriculture, Biodiversity) offer as good a focus as any – to avoid overloading the debate.
3. How to we measure the outputs? WE need new methods of assessing progress.

Desighen Naidoo agreed that governments were facing a crisis of form and functionality around what the CSD should be doing, but he raised another question about how the CSD relates to the other Commissions, as well as with ECOSOC. A further question related to the pros and cons of an “expert” versus “political” debate, noting that there was quite abit of overlap between the two – as he pointed out it would be naïve to say the policy makers weren’t in some ways expert on certain issues or that experts were not going to have some political aspects to their work. He therefore did not entirely agree with Margolis on moving on from political debate. Naidoo felt was a need to have some political debate in combination with the partnerships processes. Noting there was polarity in the discussion between adopting a minimalist model and a more comprehensive “all bodies should be accountable to the CSD” model, he said that neither was approach really feasible but what is agreed on is the need for greater coordination for sustainable development. Some other questions would need to be answered about the accountability of different stakeholder groups. Similarly there was a need to increase the relevance of ministerial input. Finally he made three points that the CSD should:

1. Envelope a range of institutions
2. Restructure itself in relation to other reform processes, including the Brettonwoods reform
3. Allow for flexibility in the reform process, so that the changes would not be fixed for the next ten years by a rushed decision made in the next three months. Rather, that governments should define the next two years and allow for reassessment at that time.

Following on from these ideas, I Gede Ngurah Swajaya agreed that the new implementation focus should avoid renegotiating principles that had been agreed before. Instead of WEHAB he thought that the CSD should orientate around thematic areas along the lines of the Plan of Implementation, but addressing the crosscutting issues (finance, technology transfer etc) within thematic area. He argued that some policy discussion would still be needed, especially for new and emerging policy areas. He also noted that one of the biggest problems that would need to be addressed was the lack of linkage between the multi-stakeholder process and the political debate. He noted, however that the bottom-up approach that had been attempted for the Summit had helped make the MSPs and policy discussions more legitimate. Over the next year he hoped to see an organisational session, implementation discussion, and policy session to take place to feed into the SIDS conference (Barbados + 10) in 2004. Finally, he noted that whilst the Multi-stakeholder Dialogues offered a unique interactive debate, greater work was required to ensure the effective interaction of the developing countries in the process.

Minu Hemmati, concluded the presentations by outlining some ideas relating to the partnerships processes. She pointed out that the Summit had generated a pool of some four hundred partnership initiatives, indicating something of the significant amount of energy, enthusiasm and readiness for action that CSD should try to nurture, build on, and multiply for implementation. During the Summit there had led to considerable degree of interaction, innovation and joint learning between different groups. But in the context of mobilising stakeholders for collaborative action, she said that we need an approach that is different from the ways that governments have traditionally interacted

in UN fora. “If we want to inspire joint efforts of stakeholders to overcome their differences, to identify their common ground and work together where they can. If we want to initiate processes of common review of progress, of joint learning, including from barriers encountered, failures suffered. Then we need a people-focused approach - vs. the document-focused approach of negotiations. For that to happen, we need different formats of meetings. Principally, we should first agree the PURPOSE of meetings, then discuss the appropriate meeting formats.” To make real progress participants will need to go to meetings and discussions with a mindset that is more conducive to changing their opinions rather than defending their positions. She noted, “The desire to implement is huge. This should be acknowledged and used”. She also said that governments should not underestimate people’s respect for the UN. By calling on people, the UN makes them feel as though they are contributing to the big picture, realising that even seemingly small activities can have value “This can really help inspire people. Partnerships must be shown to be worthwhile to people. Principally, that applies to everyone, be they business people, or NGO people, or trade union people, or local authority people, or women”. She said “I am saying this on the basis of my experience with Stakeholder Forum's Implementation Conference process. I have believed in people before Johannesburg, but I came back from Jo'burg believing in people even more. And they need to be developed in a way that gives people the space to be a real part of the process.” She noted there are some dilemmas to be faced:

- Need reporting about how partnerships are helping to deliver international commitments to ensure accountability but these should not be imposed in such a way as to overburden and “kill” the processes before they’re even off the ground
- They need to be controllable with predictable outcomes, whilst retaining flexibility to allow for creativity and to trust people in their commitment to make a contribution
- There needs to be leadership from the international community whilst inspiring people to act for themselves, in their own unique way

Discussion

During the questions and answer session that followed a number of points were raised. One person noted that there were a number of good examples elsewhere in the UN that could be used to help enhance the CSD, utilising more bottom up processes. Another along the same lines cited the Security Council as an example where NGO briefings are incorporated into the final decisions.

One participant commented that one should remember that the “grass roots are experts in their own right but are still not really able to bring their voice to such meetings”. Jonathon Margolis responded quoting the film “Field of dreams” – “if you build it they will come”. He said if we build the right forum, one that is relevant and action-orientated people will come – are that there are alternative ways to get people involved in the process without bringing them to the meetings themselves. He supported Desighen Naidoo’s original presentation that the CSD should try to be flexible in how it develops, to give enough space to allow experimentation to take place, to allow enough room for errors and learning from them. He recalled a joint event during the Summit, held called the Sustainable Development Institute, involving instructors from 17 countries, which had allowed for a series of training opportunities for all stakeholders. It was a very different fora from the Summit but it had allowed many countries to contribute to teaching and shared learning.

John Waugh (IUCN) said that the coordination between various inter-governmental bodies would also need to be addressed. Along the same lines as the “issue commission” idea discussed in Stakeholder Forum’s paper, he noted that the UN Forum on Forests might be a useful model to use

to review interactions around a particular issue. The CSD could create these review bodies and follow-up on their recommendations. Linda Elswick (International Partners for sustainable Agriculture) cited another example of the FAO, Swiss government and Sustainable Agriculture and Rural development (SARD) network that had established roundtable to discuss various aspects relating to mountain areas. The groups had looked at case studies and developed common priorities and come out with a broad consensus of what all the groups had contributed.

David Hales rapped up the event outlining some fundamental questions that will need to be answered if progress is to be made in really enhancing the CSD.

- **Which** forum should be coordinated? Coordination might not need to take place at the CSD, but issues of trace, environment, development do need to be better linked up
- **What** issues should be focused on? WEHAB, Agenda21, Millennium Development goals?
- **Who** should be at the table? “Technical experts”, major groups, practitioners, relevant government ministries?
- **How** should the process function? Introduction of implementation programmes or more policy discussions? It needs to meet the needs of people.

In summary some challenging points were raised during the event. The principle one being, how do we avoid creating an organisation that defeats its own purpose by getting bogged down with policy / process issues and is not able to produce tangible results? Similarly, even if the modalities of the CSD are altered will it actually change anything if the people who attend the meeting remain the same? The event also highlighted that few people appear to be ready to bring really new ideas to the table. We all face a challenge to “think outside of the box” - to decide what kind of institution we really need at the global level to support sustainable development, whether it is the CSD or something entirely different.

For further information and a copy of the Stakeholder Forum briefing paper contact:
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