

The Institutions Debate

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In order to achieve the goal of sustainable development recognition must be given to the interaction between economic, social and environmental trends. Institutions will need to be established which can expose policy and programme needs and requirements in order to integrate environmental considerations into plans at all levels. International institutions will play a key role.

If the UN Conference on Environment and Development accomplished anything, it was to force people worldwide to re-think how their lives affect natural environments and resources and to confront anew what determines the surrounds in which they live. But the world is still in the conceptual stages of putting that legacy into practice. As much as individual choices remain the bottom line, those choices will have to be mustered and channelled so that collectively they support sustainable development. Without common structures where agreements can be forged and commitments made to stick, and where resources can be pooled to achieve shared goals, individual choices may work at cross purposes. Both nationally and internationally, our institutions of government serve those functions.

The institutions debate at UNCED can be seen from two perspectives: the tasks to be performed, and the structural settings used to define and organize those tasks. It comes as no surprise that Agenda 21 applied these perspectives to particular sectors, such as agriculture and human settlements.

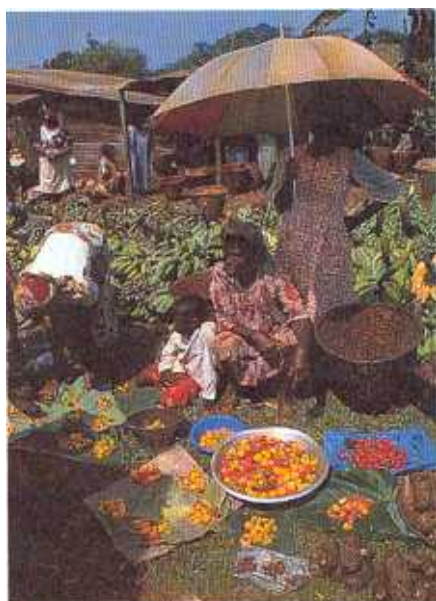
Where the Rio Conference took a quantum leap forward, however, was in recognizing that the interactions among sectors, and the intertwined nature of economic, social and environmental trends warranted a new approach to defining and organizing tasks, both at the national level and internationally. The 1972 Stockholm Conference launched efforts to integrate environmental considerations into development sector-by-sector and project-by-project, and these responsibilities were left largely in the hands of the managers. The Rio Conference has called for institutions that can expose policy and programme interactions in the planning stages, in order to anticipate and avoid conflicts that might arise

later. It has also sought to open these processes to all affected constituencies and major groups¹, so as to better 'ground-truth' the policies and increase the stake of those who can make them work. The challenge now is getting these institutions to take root.

From the perspective of tasks to be performed, Agenda 21 will require regular environmental monitoring and data collection programmes to identify trends and patterns in social, economic and environmental conditions. More resources will have to be devoted to expert analysis to establish what combination of human activities and natural forces produced these conditions, and to evaluate the costs, benefits, and risks posed by different policies, technologies or development projects and strategies. Building consensus among multiple constituencies and reconciling the policies (and budgets) that govern their activities will place unprecedented demands on institutional structures and processes and a new order of magnitude of transparency and accountability will be necessary to maintain that consensus, verifying that responsibilities are equitable shared and effectively carried out.

This focus on the institutions debate at UNCED will concentrate on the international institutional arrangements, and the next steps that can put them into practice. The building blocks for international institutions, however are the decisions and activities undertaken at the national level. After Rio, it is up to each country to translate UNCED's Agenda 21 into a national strategy, tailored to its particular conditions and development objectives and updated regularly. National structures should be set up to coordinate their preparation, and funding, and to review them based on consultative processes in which all major groups have access to information and can contribute to the outcome. These national Agenda 21s should ensure that policies and programmes complement and reinforce each other. Ideally, when national actions have transboundary, regional or global consequences, the national agenda would reflect agreed international policies and objectives. Thus each nation would be responsible for integrating country programmes and action plans prepared under

1 The major groups identified in the UNCED process included business and industry, trade and labour associations, scientific and other professional organizations, women and youth, religious groups, indigenous peoples, local communities, farmers, etc.



the ozone, climate and biodiversity treaties, for example, into national sustainable development strategies.

The initiative for forging these strategies does not rest with governments alone. The engagement of major groups is vital in convening the process and designing and carrying out the strategies. And where international development assistance plays a role, donor consortia – whether based on the round tables employed by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the consultative group sponsored by the World Bank, or other alternatives – should adjust their membership and reorient their operations to better support the formulation and implementation of broadly-based, well-integrated national strategies.

The implications of Agenda 21 for international institutions are legion. And they are complicated by the fact that the structures of international governance are less well developed and more dispersed than those at the national level. The great achievements of Rio were to focus the next stages of institutional reform and renovation, and to create in Agenda 21 a conceptual framework within which policy and programme initiatives can be related and upon which priorities can be agreed. That framework sets forth objectives and timetables in sectoral



and cross-sectoral areas, and links these to the need for data and information, scientific and technological means, capacity-building initiatives, regional and international cooperation and financial resources.

The decisions on international institutions taken at Rio can be summarized as follows:

First, UNCED called for the establishment of a high-level UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which will begin meeting in 1993. Its mandate is to review progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and to rationalize inter-governmental decision-making on environment and development issues. The Commission is to draw on information provided by governments, reports from relevant UN system organizations, information on progress in implementing international environmental conventions, and input from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The organizational details of the new Commission, which is to report to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), has been determined by the UN General Assembly this autumn, including its membership, relationship to other UN bodies, and the frequency, duration and location of its meetings. Staffing decisions for both the Commission and the inter-agency coordinating mechanism noted below are left

up to UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali.

Second, UNCED provided for regular oversight by the UN General Assembly and suggested that no later than 1997 it convene a special session to review and appraise Agenda 21. At the 1992 session of the Assembly, countries are requested to report their plans and commitments for making financial resources available to support the decisions of the Rio Conference. This sets a precedent for annual pledging sessions on environment and development, reinforced by the Commission's mandate to track commitments of financial resources.

Third, ECOSOC, consistent with its mandate, is given responsibility for coordinating the different UN agencies and programmes, while the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), composed of the directors of each agency and headed by the UN Secretary-General, is to be 'revitalized' to promote effective inter-agency collaboration on environment and development. It may establish a special task force for this purpose. An important aspect of both the Commission and the inter-agency process is the effort to better link the UN system with the international financial institutions – the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the regional development banks – and with the growing number of regional and multilateral organizations that are not UN organs *per se* (e.g. the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the South Pacific Forum, the European Community, the Latin American Economic System). Following UNCED, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali established an inter-agency task force to report back to him in preparation for the autumn General Assembly on the system-wide institutional implications of the Conference.

Fourth, in the area of data collection, environmental monitoring, and expert assessment, Agenda 21 in virtually every chapter underscores the need for better information and analysis to underpin sustainable development policies and programmes. On the institutional side, it has encouraged the strengthening of Earthwatch, the inter-agency environmental monitoring programme coordinated by UNEP, and called for the establishment of a similar

Development Watch to coordinate economic and social statistics and assessments. These would be linked by an 'appropriate' UN office. In addition, the UN Secretary-General is to make recommendations to the General Assembly at its autumn session on the appointment of a high-level board of eminent persons, who in their personal capacity would provide expertise in environment and development, including scientific expertise. Finally, drawing on the model of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Agenda 21 encourages the establishment of inter-governmental scientific and technical panels on different environment and development issues.

Fifth, regional and sub-regional initiatives are highlighted throughout Agenda 21. They cover information networks and other capacity-building programmes, as well as formulating integrated policies and programmes for dealing with transboundary issues and ecosystems. While UNEP, ENDP, the UN regional economic commissions, and the regional development banks feature prominently, Agenda 21 recognizes that there are many autonomous regional institutions and conferences that may take the lead in particular efforts and with which collaboration is essential. It suggests establishing regional consultative mechanisms that include NGOs and all relevant bilateral and multilateral donors for exchanging experience and reviewing progress in implementing Agenda 21, and for harmonizing donor programmes. Its most concrete proposal is for the new UN Commission to consider an 'expeditious' survey, prepared by the UN Secretary-General, summarizing UNCED's recommendations for regional and sub-regional undertakings.

Sixth, the General Assembly is specifically requested to examine ways of enhancing the involvement of non-governmental organizations and major groups in the UN system to follow up UNCED, and to make available to them information, reports, and other data produced within the system. The more open accreditation procedures applied during UNCED are to serve as a model for expanding NGO roles and access. Beyond the UN system itself, Agenda 21 calls on all inter-

governmental organizations, including the international finance and development agencies, to reconsider their procedures so that NGOs can better contribute to policy design, decision-making, implementation and evaluation. It notes in addition the proposal for a non-governmental Earth Council. The April 1992 report of the reconvened Brundtland Commission goes further in stating that "we attach particular significance to there being a new, independent, international body outside the UN system to monitor, assess and report on environmental trends."

When the General Assembly meets to sort out the details of the Commission on Sustainable Development, it will have to consider carefully how to monitor progress in a manner that advances Agenda 21. If the Commission engages too much in finger-pointing, it will undermine its ability to constructively review and update the objectives and timetables set forth. It should follow closely the emphasis in Agenda 21 on the problems encountered by governments in implementing commitments and legal obligations, and the need for partnerships to overcome them. At the same time, the mere existence of a regular, well-publicized forum on environment and development, whose documentation clearly juxtaposes programme objectives, targets and commitments against results, means visibility and notoriety. This alone entails progress. And it underscores the importance of the data collection, assessment and expert review functions noted above. Without accurate, objective, and transparent information, progress review will be meaningless.

The General Assembly could request that the group of eminent persons first concentrate on the expert capacity needed by the UN secretariat offices and high-level positions. More changes are likely in 1992, with this phase of 'renewal' to be completed in 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations. This provides the opportunity to sort out the respective roles and staffing of the Commission, the UN Environment Programme, and other economic and social programmes.

With respect to 'hands-on operational' assistance programmes, UNCED has

recommended that UNDP act as the lead agency in organizing UN system efforts, strengthening its in-country system of resident representatives to coordinate agencies and programmes in the field. Current UN debates stress improving the links between the policies articulated by different UN system agencies and the technical cooperation they support. As these initiatives gain substance and as the policies themselves are revised to integrate environment and development goals, this should reinforce unfolding events in other fora, such as the Global Environment Facility and the OECD Development Assistance Committee, where guidelines and programmes are being designed specifically to finance the implementation of international legal obligations to protect the environment. As national structures are refined to define and organise an integrated programme for sustainable development, this will allow the Commission to concentrate on the big picture mobilizing support to achieve it from UN system technical assistance and the more substantial capital assistance programmes of the banks, and on how both can leverage private sector investment and co-financing.

The counterpart to achieving greater coherence among, and maximum benefit from, the programmes of international institutions is for individual governments to coordinate their national positions so that they are consistently reflected in the different inter-governmental organizations in which they participate. If the Commission in its relationship with ECOSOC and subject to the Agenda 21 framework can induce governments to set integrated goals, it will become far easier for the different institutional agencies and organizations to direct their efforts in mutually reinforcing initiatives. Governments will have to ensure that the representatives they send to the Commission are well versed in the issues before it, familiar with its work from year to year, and well connected to power and influence at home. They must be willing to use it to set new goals and update old ones. And the non-governmental community must find new ways to inform and inspire the Commission in its vision of sustainable development.