

Feature



non-governmental organizations.

A shift in attitude

Another spot in an otherwise cloudy future is a shift in attitude on the part of two of the world's crucial players: the United States and China. Both Washington, due to the Clinton-Gore administration, and Beijing, with their new comprehensive national Agenda 21 plan, seem much more receptive to the concept of sustainable development. However, it remains to be seen how these new attitudes translate into action.

Then there are those crucial issues — such as finance, including the restructuring of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and technology transfer — that seem to underpin to the whole sustainable development process, and that are far from being resolved.

Ditto for the issue of consumption and of lifestyle patterns, which are crucial factors in the lopsided ratio that marks the difference between life in the North and the South. Indeed the recession in the world economy in the past two years has proved just how difficult squaring that equation has been and will be.

Counting the cost

In fact, the deepening world recession added a major — and somewhat unexpected — roadblock months after heads of states and delegates left Brazil and returned home with grand plans for achieving sustainable development. In addition the cost of placing peacekeepers in various international hotspots such as Bosnia and Somalia has left the till empty when it comes to new funding for financing what the UNCED Secretariat estimated

would be a US \$125 billion per annum price tag for implementing the 40 chapters of Agenda 21.

'Instead it is basically a sum zero game when it comes to new money,' said Cliff Curtis, an international policy advisor with Greenpeace. There was approximately \$4 to \$5 billion pledged in Rio in new funds and very little if any of that has materialized.' Nowadays many international financial experts who have worked closely with the financial issue concede that the crucial question is no longer 'new' money.

The question now is making use of existing money in the most efficient way,' says Hussein Abaza, chief economist and head of UNEP's Economics and Environment division. This is especially true when it comes to making the best possible use of money spent by various United Nations.

As Strong and others would admit, there has been some progress in areas of policy.

Climate change, nuclear waste

dumping at sea and biological

diversity are but three important ones.

It is now obvious that Rio marked a Rubicon of sorts when it comes to coupling environment and development as well as involving

Environment

RIO : TWO YEARS ON

by Joe Kirwin

opening countries in the international market.'

'Let's face it, the funding for subsequent sustainable development will not be resolved until there is a level playing field in the global marketplace,' Abaza added. 'Capacity-building in the developing world is a great idea and very fashionable but two things have to happen: subsidies must be removed — and the GATT negotiations last year proved how difficult that will be. Also environmental and social costs of products should be internalized to reflect their real costs and to make sure the full value of the commodity is borne by the consumer and producer.'

Economic instruments pinpointed

At recent workshops and at the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) inter-sessional meetings on the finance issue, economic instruments — especially in the form of 'green taxes' — in both developed and developing nations, have been pinpointed as a likely way to raise needed funds for sustainable development. The latest green tax proposed would slap a levy on airlines.

There was a general agreement at an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) meeting held in February this year that there is a need for further reduction of greenhouse gases than that already called for in the treaty.

The possibility of reforming national taxation systems to shift the bulk of the tax burden from labour, capital and income towards the use of natural resources should be considered,' stated a policy paper distributed at a recent CSD meeting.

Technology transfer and the concomitant intellectual property rights issue have proved to be only slightly less difficult. Workshops held in Norway and another held in Colombia jointly sponsored with the United States provided numerous options. These included clearing-houses, referral services, exchange programmes, 'one-stop shops', build-operate-transfer

schemes and technology rights banks. But first more research and development is needed when it comes to pinpointing environmentally sound technologies.

One quick solution, according to Abaza, would be providing appropriate technology in place of aid money. 'So much aid comes in the form of technology, which worked in the donor nation but collapse in the developing world after a year or two,' Abaza said. 'That has happened for various reasons. Either it was the wrong

across the Atlantic Ocean.

UNITED NATIONS
ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME
UNEP

were several years ago.

An issue interrelated to both climate change and biological diversity concerns forestry. The squabbling between tropical timber producing and temperate timber producing nations prevented Rio convention on forestry and hampered negotiations over the Forestry Principles and has continued. That became obvious during last year's negotiations at the International Tropical Timber Organization.

In that accord a compromise

was reached by which developed nations (that is,

temperate timber producing nations) agreed to commit to sustainable forestry practices by the year 2000. The deal was struck after tropical timber producing nations argued in vain that the agreement should cover all forests, North and South.

At the third UNCED prep-com — held in Geneva — an evening session on desertification was scheduled. Few showed up other than a number of African delegates. Most were at a reception held in the foyer of the Palais des Nations. Feeling snubbed, the African nations banded together and eventually put

forth demands for a Desertification Convention.

Whatever comes of the final treaty — and certainly now money is not likely — it has become obvious that the scope and seriousness of the problem of desertification is still not understood. Western media has been rife with reports about the 'myth of desertification'. Unlike ozone depletion or climate change, which are concepts now rooted in public perception, most assume desertification is an African problem involving nations on the fringe of the Sahara Desert. This is despite the fact that it is a worldwide land degradation problem with more than 900 million people at risk,' says Franklin Cardy, who heads UNEP's Desertification Unit.

A stunning success

Most international experts, who have followed the UNCED process and the post-Rio progress, agree there is one stunning success that has emerged from Rio. This is NGO participation in the process.

Despite getting their foot in the UNCED and now the CSD door, many NGOs admit they too have had a difficult time making a post-Rio transition.

Now that the international community is calling for practical case studies of substance on such issues as sustainable agriculture, management of toxic wastes, changing consumption patterns, and human habitats, the same NGOs who worked with the UNCED process are not necessarily the ones to deliver the goods,' said Mike McCay, with the United States Citizens Network.

Encouragement from grass roots groups

Strong could not agree more: 'If there is one encouraging sign since Rio, it is the way grassroots groups at the local level around the world have taken the Rio spirit and adopted their own Agenda 21 plans,' says Strong. 'I just hope that enthusiasm and concern eventually work their way up the system and push governments into the action that is so desperately needed.'

Much of the task of monitoring and cajoling governments into action falls into the court of the CSD. While most academics, NGOs and others refrain from grading the work of the CSD to date, most agree that the 1994 session will go a long way in determining just how effective it will be.

Will governments, via the CSD, be able to take off their national hats and work for the common good of the planet? asks Curtis. That is what it really all comes down to.

— Our Planet

Healthy Sanitation and Environmental Conservation

by Qazi Mahbubul Hasan

S M A Rashid in his keynote address mentioned that in the DPHE-UNICEF initiated national programme on Social Mobilization for Sanitation the NGOs were identified as potential partners. He added that primary health care, where sanitation was a basic component, had been taken as they key strategy to achieve the national goal: Health for All by 2000. He said that nationwide campaign had been launched by NGO Forum to motivate people and to provide sanitation facilities in every household in 10 diarrhoea-prone areas of the country by the year 1994.

Mahbubul Hasan in his speech mentioned that the challenge of the present was sanitation promotion. He hoped that all concerned will come forward to help combat this challenge.

The Workshop was conducted in a participatory manner. The participants through

their active participation identified some major problems in executing the social mobilization process. They also have some recommendations to resolve those problems.

The major problems as identified were:

Lack of coordination among various agencies, inadequate development communication and ineffective information flow, lack of appropriate technology and lack of women's participation in the sanitation programme.

For resolving these problems the recommendations were to develop an effective coordination mechanism between GOs and NGOs, implementing the sanitation laws strictly, educate people by providing appropriate technology.

At the end of the workshop S M A Rashid, Director, NGO Forum articulated that NGO Forum will provide all out cooperation to its partner organization in implementing social mobilization programme.

ECONOMIC growth has always been measured by changes in the Gross National Product (GNP). The price of goods and services bought and sold in the market place is considered to be the standard of value used to compute GNP. Net National Product (NNP) is another well known measurement of national income which is simply GNP minus the amount of capital used up in the course of the production of GNP. These measurements provide us with the information of goods and services produced in a country over a period of time. They can be used for comparison of economic prosperity over time and between countries. They are also used as an indicator of standard of living in a country (e.g. UNDP's Human Development Index).

However, national income accounts are limited mostly to market determined values since they include commodities bought and sold in the market. Therefore, many non-marketed goods and services remain outside the national income accounts.

One classic example is the activities performed by

housewives in the households like collecting fuel wood, fetching water, rearing children. Also value of a park or a lake remain outside the accounts. The effect of environmental degradation, pollution and waste disposal cannot always be captured by market based information. So these phenomena are not reflected in the conventional accounts.

Another important limitation is that they do not discriminate between costs and benefits. So they provide no way of determining net changes in social welfare. Pollution caused by economic activity does not decrease national income as measured by the conventional accounts.

In fact, if society has to

spend money to restore the

environment, these expenditures also increase GNP in the existing system. They do so in the same way that the production of food increases it. Or a tree left standing in a national park is not counted in the GNP. But when it is cut and sold as lumber in the market it is measured as an increase in the GNP. The tree may be worth much, more to society as a tree than as lumber, but that does not matter. It is accounted for only when it is sold as a marketable commodity, when it has a price in the market. The inherent value is ignored.

recorded as capital consumption in the account.

Natural capital eg stock and quality of air and water, open space, wildlife, natural beauty are not marketed but contribute substantially to society's welfare. Amenity losses suffered as a result of the production of market goods should properly be entered as costs of production. So any environmental damage that occurs should be valued and deducted from the GNP. Man-made capital depreciation is deducted from GNP to obtain NNP. This is a better measurement of well being because it allows for the fact that some of the wealth from which GNP flows is subject to decay. But NNP ignores natural wealth. Natural wealth is also subject to de-

preciation which is occurred by running down reserves of oil or reducing the standing stock of forest. National accounts are distorted as they include one form of depreciation and ignore the other.

The deficiencies of the conventional accounts to the extent of ignoring the depletion of natural capital have caught the attention of environmentalists as well as various international organizations. A number of OECD countries have taken initiatives to compile accounts on natural resource stocks and changes in the stocks. Attempts have also been taken for accounting the environment in the developing countries eg. Indonesia, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Mexico, Papua New Guinea.

Bangladesh is a country where massive poverty and high population density lead to land clearing, inappropriate cultivation practice, tree-cutting, over-fishing, overgrazing etc which cause deforestation, air and water pollution, land degradation and rapid depletion of the natural resources. If this trend continues the development of the economy will be jeopardised while sustainability of the economy will be a far cry. The situation calls for a practical policy aimed at economic development without degrading the environment.

Of course, a comprehensive and detailed accounting of the environment is complex and costly in practice. A feasible alternative is to publish a separate set of resource accounts which show, in non-monetary units, just what is happening to the resources in a country.

Such accounts exist in France and Norway. More modest modifications can be made to sets of environmental statistics published in most developed economies but which are rare in the developing world. The main objective is the need to show how changes in environmental variables are linked to changes in the economy. This will at least help us understand that the economy and environment are not unrelated. This will make us realise that growth is not free. We tend to think that goods are created from nothing and once their benefits are taken they vanish to nothingness once more. But for every growth there is a cost; in any growth-process, the value of additional benefits declines as the costs of obtaining them rise.

The writer is a Research Associate at BIDS, currently pursuing PhD on Environmental Economics in London.

Aftab Choudhury: A Unique Lover of Trees

by M H Khan

Aftab Choudhury is a prominent journalist and columnist and a social worker of Sylhet. He writes valuable articles in local and national newspapers. He reports on tree-plantation programmes of government and non-government organisations but he never publicises himself or ask the press to so publicise or to eulogize him for his having planted thousands of trees and undertaking the marathon task of upkeeping the plants till they grow to the size of being capable to protect themselves.

He plants trees on public and private campuses, hospitals and office grounds and at roadsides. He has developed a nursery of his own. He produces saplings in his own nursery and also collects from other nurseries. He often ventures out for his routine schedule almost every day during the planting season, with his private car loaded with saplings and manure. He approaches the public and the private authorities and house-owners to allow him to plant trees at his own cost.

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