

Beyond Johannesburg

One hundred and ten heads of state or government and 80 senior representatives from 190 countries adopted the Plan of Implementation, a "blueprint to save the Earth", after heated debate and hectic negotiations at the just-ended World Summit on Sustainable Development. Major goals have been set all right; however, the question is whether the will is there to translate these into reality, writes **Quamrul Islam Chowdhury** as he reviews the Earth Summit at Johannesburg

WE set ourselves that task of ensuring a balance among the three pillars of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental - and a focus on poverty eradication. It was essential to mobilise new resources and new energy behind a practical implementation plan," said South African Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma.

The biggest success of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) has been getting the world to turn ambitious plan set in the Millennium Declaration to halve world poverty by 2015 into a concrete set of programmes, and to mobilise funds into those programmes, she pointed out.

South African Environment Minister Valli Moosa said the WSSD brought to the fore the need to pay particular attention to the most marginalised sectors of society, including women, youth, indigenous peoples and people with disabilities.

The Plan of Implementation, he adds, includes programmes to deliver water, energy, healthcare, agricultural development and a better environment for development and better environment for the world's poor.

New targets will have an enormous impact on the global agenda, hopes Valli. Besides the previously agreed water target of halving the number of people unable to access safe drinking water by 2015, it was agreed also to halve the number of people without basic sanitation by 2015.

After ten years of Rio Earth Summit, countries have agreed to reverse the trend in biodiversity loss by 2010 and to restore collapsed fish stocks by 2015. Chemicals, which have detrimental health impact, will be phased out by 2020.

Some of the 65,000 delegates said it was a serious retreat. Some also described it as a step backward. Some others said there were essentially no change. Still some others recognised some small gains. Significant achievement, some argued.

In a departure from previous global conferences and world summits, the WSSD shifted the focus of world leaders from policy debates to the real task of "making it happen" and achieving high-level commitments by heads of state and leaders from business and civil society to meet the goals set.

As testimony to this, some concrete actions, partnerships and funding targets were announced by countries and stakeholders. At the WSSD, 300 partnerships were launched including 32 energy initiatives, 21 major water programmes and 32 programmes for biodiversity and ecosystem management. New ground has been broken.

Halve the proportion of people without safe drinking water and adequate sanitation by 2015. It's a significant achievement. The main opposition to this commitment came from the United States, but, as the week went on, it became more and more isolated, with allies on other contentious issues - like the OPEC countries, Canada, Japan and even the big business lobby - calling for the target to be agreed. In the end, the US was forced to give in. The deal was welcomed by many developing countries as marking an important step towards preventing more than two million deaths a year from diseases caused by people drinking dirty water. It completes plans laid out in the United Nations' 2002 Millennium Declaration to halve, by 2015, the number of people - more than a billion - who are unable to reach, or afford, safe drinking water.

Yes, it will make a difference if nations act now to implement what they have promised to do. It could drastically cut the number of people, mainly children, who die because they drink polluted water. New partnerships will help reach the targets for water and sanitation. The European Union Water Initiative will help millions of people gain access to clean drinking water and sanitation facilities.

It has been agreed that a World Trade Organisation accord on patents should not prevent poor countries providing medicines to all. Reduce HIV prevalence in young men and women aged 15 to 24 by 25 per cent in affected countries by 2005 and globally by 2010.

The striking point was the issue of women's reproductive rights, particularly a paragraph calling for better health services "consistent with national laws and cultural and religious values". Some countries feared the wording could endorse the practice of genital mutilation. Eventually the summit compromised on a text on women's reproductive health that satisfied con-

cerns that it was a human right but could not be interpreted as promoting abortion.

The patents clause is key because of the unaffordability of AIDS drugs. This is an issue over which South Africa went to court. Development programmes to reduce by two-thirds the mortality rates for infants and children by 2015, and reduce preventable deaths among children, particularly girls.

Goal and targets from previous conventions and summits have been strengthened. The WTO/TRIPS agreement on intellectual property rights has been confirmed and will see up access to affordable drugs for major health problems, including TB, malaria and HIV/AIDS.

The implementation plan brings a new focus on children and takes into account fundamental freedoms, including those of women.

The agreement on agriculture, fisheries and food security to cease destructive fishing practices and establish marine protected areas and networks by 2012. It has been a significant achievement of the summit. The agreement to maintain or restore fish stocks to levels that can be sustainably harvested by not later than 2015. It is also a major achievement. It means all be responsible for reversing declines in fish stocks or maintaining them at a healthy level. But environmentalists said the deal was a classic example of "too little, too late". Fish stocks would be in crisis, with more than 70 per cent of commercially important stocks either over-exploited, depleted, or close to the maximum sustainable level of exploitation. Consumption of fish has increased by 240 per cent since 1960.

It could make a difference. But the wording of the agreement is not particularly strong, and many fishing nations have so far strongly resisted tough controls.

There is a new and unprecedented focus on food security as global challenge. It addresses in an integrated way blockages of trade, vulnerabilities arising from climatic change and interventions to enable greater productivity. The WSSD has sharpened attention to the poorest areas where the vulnerabilities are greatest.

As part of the response to rapid urbanisation in developing countries the WSSD fostered an integrated approach to sustainable urbanisation with emphasis on improving the quality of life of slum dwellers through informal settlement upgrading programmes.

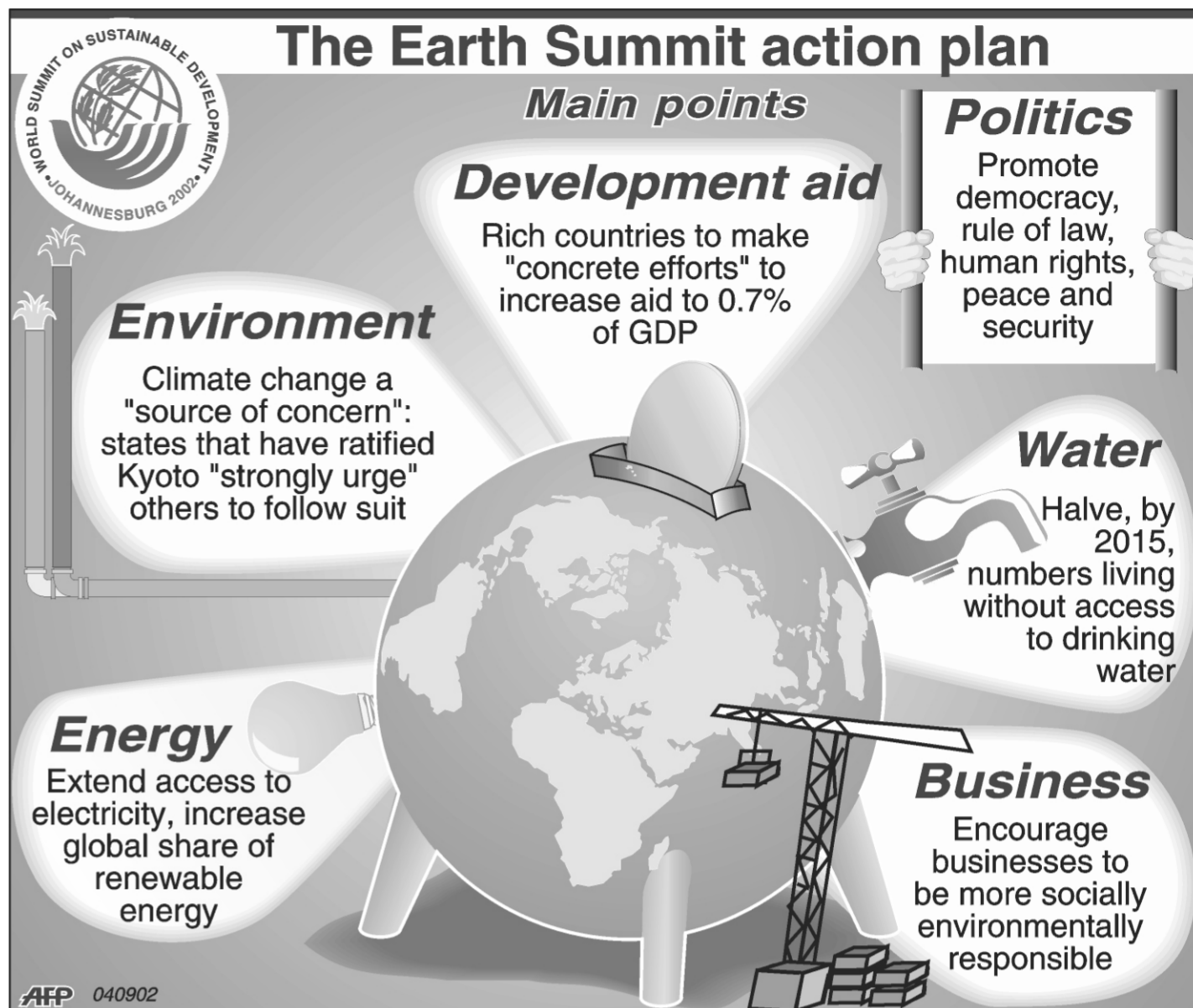
In a far-reaching agreement clarity has been reached on the relationship between the WTO rules on trade and the system of global governance on the environment as two systems of equal status.

There has been an agreement on commitment to significantly reduce biodiversity loss by 2010. Agreements on biodiversity will bring great benefits to developing countries. Targets were achieved despite opposition from some developed countries and biodiversity protection will be extended to the oceans. Environmentalists were dismayed at the wording, which is less strong than a resolution agreed at an international conference in April. The new, non-binding proposal is aimed at curbing the destruction of habitats such as rainforests, wetlands and coral reefs, which is driving animal and plant species to extinction. The target was set despite resistance from the US and the G77 group of developing countries, but remains weak and largely meaningless. It will make a little difference. There is nothing here but a vague and weak aspiration and no concrete measures to make sure that the extinction rate is actually slow.

Other agreements like support phasing out of lead in petrol, paint and other sources, promote studies of heavy metals that are harmful to the environment and develop a 10-year plan to ensure goods are produced and consumed in a way that does not destroy the environment will also make a very little difference. But the agreement to produce and use chemicals safely has been seen as a major achievement of the Johannesburg Summit.

On poverty, the agreement to halve the number of the world's poor living on less than \$1 a day by 2015 is also disappointing. Significantly improve the lives of at least 100-million slum dwellers by 2020 can be seen as a small gain. But establishment of a voluntary solidarity fund to wipe out poverty is seen as a step backward.

The over-arching aim of the summit was to bridge the income gap



between the world's richest and poorest, while ensuring the environment is not harmed in the process.

But the sprawling agenda and divergent interests meant there were compromises aplenty in the summit agreement, some of which were attacked by civic and environmental groups as significant steps backward from previous commitments. It will not make a difference. The real goal-to halve dire poverty by 2015-were decided by the Millennium Summit two years ago. The test will be whether countries meet them.

On energy the delegates agreed voluntary regional and national targets for access to renewable energy like solar, wind and wave energy. It has also been seen by most of the delegates as a step backward. The summit failed to set any targets for increasing renewable energy, thus falling short of one of the most important yardsticks for success. It agreed to phase out harmful subsidies "where appropriate", but included passages boosting nuclear power and fossil fuels that causes global warming. Attempts to increase the rate of renewable energy were stymied by opposition from the world's major oil producers and biggest oil consumer, the US.

Energy has for the first time in a major summit been raised as a central concern of the global community. A link to the Millennium Declaration Goals will mean global action co-ordinated by the UN. Countries have agreed focus on developing renewable sources of energy including promoting technology transfer and financing projects in developing countries.

It will not really make a difference and could make things worse. But some developing countries said they would press ahead with renewable

energy anyway.

Other agreement on the need for improvements to energy access so that all people should have access to conventional forms of energy is also seen as a disappointing one.

Ratification to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change increased, and the agreed summit text says nations that have ratified Kyoto "strongly urge" the other states to ratify it in "a timely manner". Russia, China and some other countries also announced their decision to ratify Kyoto Protocol thereby making it a legally binding treaty, even without the signing of USA. British Prime Minister Tony Blair also put pressure on USA to soften its stand on Kyoto Protocol agreed in 1997.

True, Johannesburg Summit was dominated by the Africans, as put by leader of Bangladesh delegation Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman. An Asian chapter in the Plan of Implementation was included at the pressure of Bangladesh, who mobilised G 77 support in this regard. At the summit, US leader of the delegation Secretary of States Colin Powell announced fresh assistance of \$6 billion, EU pumped in \$4 billion and Japan announced another \$4 billion. But this amount is not enough for the smooth execution of the Plan of Implementation. And President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa has appealed to the international community to take ownership of Plan of Implementation and Political Declaration adopted in Johannesburg and to act collectively. "Let make things happen together" he calls.

Sustainable solution to solid waste management

The Waste Concern, a research-based non-government organisation working with communities in solid waste management, has shown the way in converting garbage into a sustainable source of revenue and employment generation, writes **Abdul Kader**

WITH the municipal administration to its limit, managing tonnes of solid waste the city produces every day, a research-based non-government organisation has come up with a sustainable solution.

"Solid waste can be converted into resources," says the Waste Concern (WC), which is working on community-level composting with participation from the public and private sectors.

"If the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) recycles 50 per cent of the total waste, it will save about Tk 38 crore per year," says AH Maqsood Sinha, Executive Director of the WC.

"The amount would double, if recycling can cover the total waste."

The NGO has already tried out recycling at its compost plants at Mirpur, Bailey Road, Green Road and Dhalpur areas with participation from local communities.

The plants, said Sinha, at present produce 675 kilograms of compost from three tons of solid waste.

"It costs Tk 1.70 to produce one kg of organic compost (without land cost) and the composts are sold at Tk 2.50 to Alpha Agro and Map Agro, who market these across the country."

There is an increasing demand of composts from the farmers, he said. "In 2000, it was 200 tons and has now increased to 1,500 tons. It is of low price and good for farming."

The same could be tried out at the Matuail dumpsite. The landfill

area is almost up to its limit. The DCC is trying to expand the dumpsite area and is on the lookout for a new site.

The WC solution can extend the usability of the Matuail site by several more years.

"If the government makes a compost plant at Matuail, it can be used for sixty years as a dumping site. It can also save the landfill area and effectively reduce the city's solid waste management cost," says Sinha.

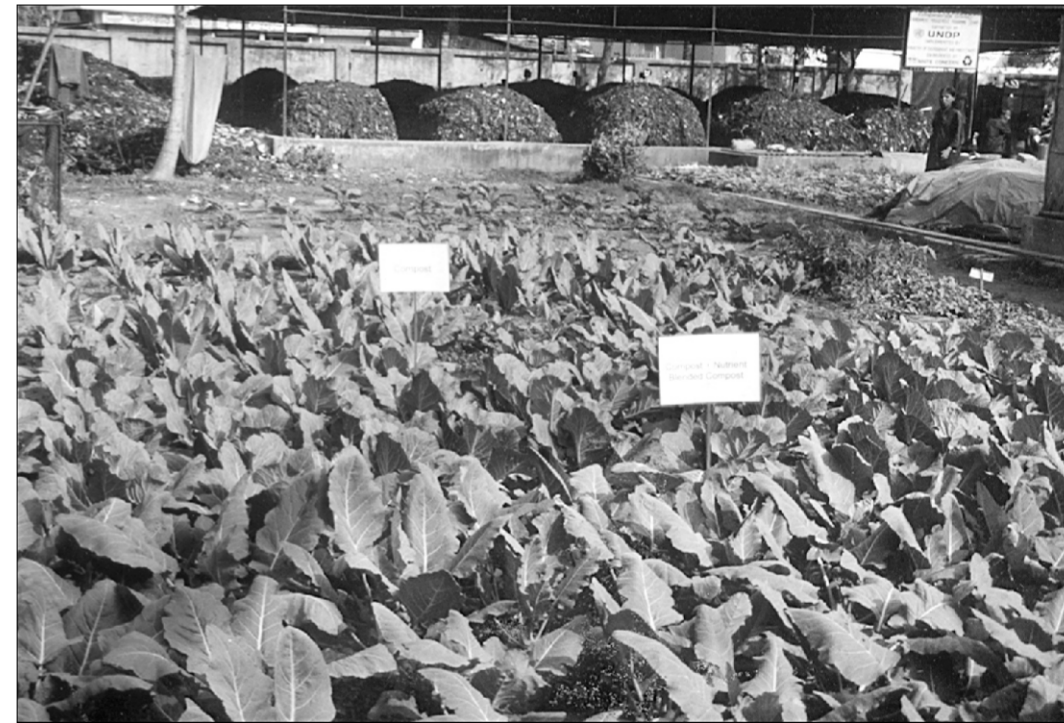
The DCC spends, on an average, Tk 2,045 crore per year for solid waste management.

"If the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) recycles 50 per cent of the total waste, it will save about Tk 38 crore per year... The amount would double, if recycling can cover the total waste."

About 80 per cent of the total waste generated by the city of Dhaka is organic and left unutilised. Some 3,500 tons of solid waste is generated per day in the DCC, according to a WC estimate. Forty-two per cent is collected by the DCC, with the rest left to rot on roadsides, open drains, low-lying areas, etc. Again, the collected waste is



Workers (left) at a Waste Concern compost plant in the city sift through solid waste for recyclable products, leaving the organic content for use as soil nutrient (right).



often disposed of in uncontrolled manner, causing health hazard and environment degradation.

"Decentralised composting of urban solid waste can contribute to improvement of management," said Sinha.

The organic (bio-degradable) portion of the waste can be converted into fertiliser which could improve the ability of soil to retain water and resist soil erosion.

Besides, the composting project can create employment for the urban poor, generate revenue and produce environment friendly bio-fertiliser besides ensuring cleaner and healthier communities.

"We are trying to spread awareness in the community by training about the how to separate waste from source," Sinha said.

The WC waste management project is divided into three segments - collection, recycling and resource recovery of composting. Also, there is marketing of recycled products and composts, he said.

This compost is also valuable as a pesticide substitute. When compost is added in conjunction with nutrient, it makes the phosphorous more readily available and prolongs nitrogen availability. About 83 per cent land of the country contains 3.5 per cent organic content. Good soil requires a lot more than that.

Seventy per cent of the Waste Concern plants' cost comes from compost marketing, while the remaining 30 per cent from house-

to-house community services.

The WC gets financial support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Environment and Forest.

Since the solid waste in the country contains high organic content and moisture, "a system of simple composting or bio-gas generation is required", says Iftekar Enayetullah, a WC director who is a

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civil engineer and town-planner.

Similar waste composting plants have already been developed at Khulna and Sylhet will soon follow suit. Meanwhile, the UNICEF has replicated this in 14 cities, according to the WC.