Sustainable Development in the Context of UN Reform
Meeting Report

BACKGROUND

On Tuesday 1 May 2007 a dialogue was held on the subject of sustainable development in the context of UN reform. The discussion, endorsed by six former Chairs[1] of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), emphasised the need for a process of reflection on sustainable development governance and the role of the CSD in particular. The event was organised by Stakeholder Forum, the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, ANPED Northern Alliance for Sustainability, and the Brazilian Forum of NGOs and Social Movements for Environment and Development, and attended by representatives of government, Major Groups, and the UN system.

The workshop was held under the Chatham House rule, such that participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. The workshop Panel consisted of three speakers: one representative of the UN system, one representative of a developing country government, and one speaker from Stakeholder Forum.

A paper prepared by Stakeholder Forum, exploring how to address the current challenges related to international governance for sustainable development governance (IGSD) provided the basis for conversation. The paper is available at http://ieg.stakeholderforum.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A high-level representative of the UN system provided valuable insight to the recommendations of the High Level Panel on System-wide Coherence. The speaker noted that the Panel undertook detailed consultations with stakeholders, resulting in a practical set of recommendations which are ambitious and, if implemented, could have substantial impact on the integration of sustainable development across the UN system. He noted that the Panel aimed to target deficits within the system by: creating a sustainable development segment in ECOSOC to promote the balance between the three pillars and create a much needed feedback loop with the CSD and UN agencies, programmes and funds; strengthening UNEP's normative capacity to contribute to the operationalisation of sustainable development at the country level; and establishing a sustainable development Board to link Members States to action at the country level.

A representative from Stakeholder Forum presented a paper exploring how to address the current challenges related to IGSD. He noted that while paragraph 157 of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation provides a clear mandate for governments to keep the UN's sustainable development institutions under review, this is not occurring. As a remedy, the speaker proposed launching a two-track sustainable development initiative to enhance 'confidence building' between industrialized and developing countries in an effort define the areas where the UN's institutions, and the CSD in particular, could make a distinctive contribution to the implementation of sustainable development. He explained that the paper proposed two options for creating this much needed space for discussion:
- the establishment of an incremental process under the CSD, in the form of an open-ended *Ad Hoc* Working Group to focus mainly on the future and role of the CSD, including through a stocktaking process of the first two cycles; and, as a complementary step,
- an incremental process under the auspices of the General Assembly (GA) to identify the building blocks of a more robust intergovernmental framework for sustainable development.

---

[1] Børge Brende, CSD Chair 2004; Valli Moosa, CSD Chair 2003; Bedrich Moldan, CSD Chair 2001; Juan Mayr, CSD Chair 2000; Simon Upton, CSD Chair 1999; Henrique Cavalcanti, CSD Chair 1995

Responding to the paper, a developing country representative welcomed a process of stocktaking. She noted that the CSD 11 decision did provide clear guidance on how to make the CSD work, and that a stocktaking exercise could provide us with an opportunity to examine how to operationlise these recommendations. The speaker observed that we are currently at a cross roads in terms of political choice on reform of IGSD. She explained that measures to strengthen UNEP or the CSD represent only partial reform processes. If we are really going to mature discussion on reform and ensure that sustainable development is not an element, but the umbrella of the UN's work, then a full UN reform process would inevitably lead to the establishment of a UN sustainable development organisation. She concluded by noting that it is important to first note the results of the system-wide coherence process, and in the meantime a stocktaking of the CSD would be extremely useful.

In the discussion, delegates expressed a range of opinions on IGSD with most agreeing that a stocktaking exercise on the role of the CSD, in order to make its work more effective and impact greater, would be a useful exercise. Several speakers noted the need to ensure that any such process is demand-driven and avoids the formality of negotiations. Participants generally felt it was too early for a process under the GA and that the discussions on the Panel recommendations could provide an appropriate opportunity to address the sustainable development architecture across the UN system.

FULL REPORT

In his opening remarks, the Chair highlighted a growing perception that sustainable development is becoming a fundamental issue for security. He said that within this context, the CSD ought to be a central place for analysing problems, developing solutions, and reinforcing action— but it is not. He stressed that while there have been some important developments and successes at the CSD, these successes have not proven to be sufficient to meet the full challenge of sustainable development. The speaker explained that in light of this, Stakeholder Forum and its partners have sought to promote discussion and dialogue on the CSD in an effort to develop concrete ideas for its strengthening.

A high-level representative of the UN system provided valuable insight to the recommendations of the High Level Panel on System-wide Coherence. The speaker noted that the notion of system-wide coherence has energized discussions on UN reform, bringing a fresh approach. Unlike other panels of the Secretary-General, this Panel undertook detailed consultations with stakeholders, resulting in a practical set of recommendations which are ambitious and, if implemented, could have substantial impact on the integration of sustainable development across the UN system.

Reflecting on the Panel's approach to sustainable development, the speaker noted that the Panel had many members with direct experience of sustainable development governance. He confessed that there was a certain degree of cynicism and indifference in relation to the CSD among such members, who questioned its relevance. The speaker said that there was a sense among Panel members of immense promise, but unrealised potential: they recognized the GA adopting sustainable development as an overarching framework of work of UN as a success. Pointing to the fact that Members states and international institutions continue to look at challenges as stand along threats, rarely approaching them from the context of sustainability, he said the Panel strongly felt that not enough has been done to turn that promise into a reality.

The speaker explained that the Panel did recognise that CSD was successful in providing a new and innovative model for stakeholder engagement and a forum for exchange of ideas. However, members felt that the CSD has been far less effective in ensuring integration of the pillars of sustainable development, noting that it struggles to engage actors outside of environmental constituencies. In light of this, the speaker explained that the Panel aimed to target deficits within the system. In an effort to operationalise sustainable development at the country level, he said the Panel recommended for UNEP to build on its normative capacity, with UNDP focusing on the

operational, thereby injecting sustainable development at the level of Resident Coordinators. He explained that there was a sense among Panel members that the CSD plays an important role as a home for sustainable development in the UN, so the option of discarding the CSD was never on the table. Focusing on what can be done with the institutional architecture to improve the articulation of sustainable development in operational terms, the speaker said that the Panel recommended the establishment of a sustainable development segment in ECOSOC. Such a segment could help promote balance between the three pillars of sustainable development, focus on sustainability issues arising from the functional commissions, and provide a feedback loop.

The speaker underscored the need to approach CSD reform within the context of system-wide coherence. He explained that the first five years following Rio were extremely successful: decisions were fed back to governing bodies; decisions taken at CSD could have an impact on the work of UN agencies. Since then, however, the implementation gap has become pronounced, particularly in the context of the CSD. Emphasising that demand for sustainable development is high outside the circles of the CSD, particularly at the national level, he said that there are questions to be answered on what the international system can deliver.

The second speaker, a representative of Stakeholder Forum, highlighted the need to create space in reform processes to build confidence and overcome barriers created by of North-South tension. Pointing to paragraph 157 of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, he explained that the mandate for reviewing the international institutional framework of sustainable development is very clear. Despite this mandate, the speaker argued, this review is not taking place in a substantive manner within the UN system. He said that *Delivering as One* has helped to refocus attention on this discussion, by highlighting problems and milestones.

The CSD has preformed well when it has provided direction, the speaker said. He argued, however, that over the past three to four years the CSD has not often played this role. The speaker argued that this is due, in part, to an institutional problem: as a functional commission of ECOSOC, the CSD has no power to require action from its decisions, particularly as it relates to giving instructions to UN agencies, programmes and funds. Turning to the Stakeholder Forum paper, he explained that the paper articulates a potential mission statement or goal of an institutional initiative on the CSD: to enhance confidence building between industrialized and developing countries in an effort define the areas where the UN's institutions, and the CSD in particular, could make a distinctive contribution to the implementation of sustainable development. He emphasized that such a process would not aim to criticize the CSD or Secretariat, but rather explore how we could increase its impact.

The speaker outlined two proposals for creating this much needed space for discussion:
- the establishment of an incremental process under the CSD, in the form of an open-ended *Ad Hoc* Working Group to focus mainly on the future and role of the CSD, including through a stocktaking process of the first two cycles; and, as a complementary step,
- an incremental process under the auspices of the General Assembly (GA) to identify the building blocks of a more robust intergovernmental framework for sustainable development.

The ad-hoc working group, he explained, could create a space for groups to come together to explore how to make the CSD more effective, developing options to strengthen CSD. Noting that such a working group would reflect on process, he said it would not lead to a change of mandate. The second option, establishing an open ended consultative group, could provide an informal setting to address the institutional framework for sustainable development. He stressed that it would not need to be a negotiating centre, but could come up with options and recommendations.

The third speaker, a representative from a developing country government, noted that the distinction made in the Stakeholder Forum paper between stocktaking and a broader process is useful, as it helps us to see the big and small picture. Welcoming a process of stocktaking, the

speaker noted that the CSD 11 decision did provide clear guidance on how to make the CSD work, and that a stocktaking exercise could provide us with an opportunity to examine how to operationalise these recommendations. The speaker emphasised that the discussion on the CSD should focus on a process of strengthening, rather than reform.

The speaker observed that we are currently at a cross roads in terms of political choice on reform of IGSD. She explained that measures to strengthen UNEP or the CSD represent only partial reform processes. She said that if we are really going to mature discussion on reform and ensure that sustainable development is not an element, but the umbrella of the UN's work, then a full UN reform process would inevitably lead to the establishment of a UN sustainable development organisation. She concluded by saying that it is important to first note the results of the system-wide coherence process, and in the meantime a stocktaking of the CSD would be extremely useful.

Responding to the Stakeholder Forum paper, the UN system representative reminded participants that all discussions on institutional structure take place in a political setting. He said that as a result, perceptions are an important factor affecting the development of recommendations. As an example, the speaker highlighted the differing perceptions of the discussions on climate change in the Security Council: some viewed the discussions as a means to allow decision makers to take control of the issue and put burden on developing countries, while others felt it was useful to highlight the importance of issue. Cautioning participants against the establishment of a process on the CSD in the GA, the speaker reminded participants that it took one year to negotiate the details of a World Summit 2005 decision on reform of ECOSOC.

Taking issue with the argument that the nature of an institution determines what it is able to do, the speaker pointed to the successes of UNEP. He said that it is necessary to place emphasis on what concrete actions an institution must take, rather than its position within the UN system. The speaker said that option one of the Stakeholder Forum paper is a good idea: it is now up to the CSD to decide for itself and initiate. The speaker emphasised the need to examine the agenda of the CSD and the reintegration of the work of UN agencies into the CSD. On the size of the CSD Secretariat, he cautioned that a large secretariat can lead to competition, mission creep and overlap, leading to less incentive for organisations to collaborate. He concluded by underscoring that the CSD must be addressed within the context of UN System-wide Coherence, and that calling for an intergovernmental process would be counter productive.

Reflecting on the establishment of the CSD in 1993, a Major Group representative reminded participants that Nitin Desai had a small Secretariat when he established the Department of Sustainable Development. The Inter Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) was set up with different UN Agencies and Programmes taking responsibility for the overseeing of different chapters of Agenda 21.This ensured that UN Agencies and Programmes were held accountable outside of their own governing bodies for the implementation of Agenda 21, resulting in high level participation and activities throughout the UN system. The participant noted that another challenge to stakeholder engagement is the fact that governments are no longer required to engage stakeholders in national reporting

A representative of a developed country government underscored the need to distinguish between the concept of sustainable development and the CSD: the CSD is a structure within UN system, and sustainable development is a moving target, he said. He said that countries need to recognize their responsibilities to the implementation of sustainable development, and ensure that this is reflected in their actions at the global level. Noting that the UN system is not fit to deal with sustainable development, he said that there is a need to work on a solution to strengthen the CSD.

A Major Group representative said that a more informal process, rather than negotiations, at the CSD could yield more action-oriented outcomes to further implementation.

A Major Group representative highlighted the need to engage NGOs in CSD issues. He explained that many grassroots NGOs have a large interest in sustainable development issues, but do not interact with the CSD because it does not seem relevant. Highlighting the work of ANPED to increase awareness and participation of NGOs in the CSD, the speaker questioned whether the system will be able to respond by translating this input into relevant work.

A representative of the UN system emphasised that NGOs could play an important role in dispelling perceptions that lead to inaction and in focusing attention on where the UN could make meaningful change.

A Major Group representative supported the proposal to establish an ad hoc working group.

A representative of a developed country government noted that the Stakeholder Forum paper is interesting and contains useful ideas. In the short term, he said that there exist many realistic opportunities to strengthen the CSD. In terms of institutional architecture and system-wide coherence, he emphasised the need to ask whether a new or consolidated agency would really make a difference, particularly at the country level. He stressed the need for CSD strengthening to be demand driven at the national level.

A Major Group representative expressed concern with regard to partnerships, noting that only 1% of partnerships has delivered their aims. He said that the feedback of such experience to the CSD is essential, and expressed hope that governments would consider undertaking a stocktaking process.

A representative of a developed country government defended the record of the CSD and partnerships, noting that countries are making progress on sustainable development. The participant emphasised the need to focus on implementation, action, and partnerships. He cautioned against empowering CSD to take on more activities, as this would impinge on the Chief Executives Board and governing bodies of other UN agencies.

Emphasising the importance of civil society engagement, a Major Group representative said that a democratic deficit exists in the UN because it remains an intergovernmental organisation that is accountable to Member States. He said that much work is needed to make the UN truly democratic.

A Major Group representative highlighted the need to ensure that experience on the ground is captured at the policy level.

Offering her personal reflections, a representative of the UN system said that global negotiations are, by nature, cumbersome and that advancing consensus at the global level is difficult and slow. She said that in order to further implementation, it is necessary to focus on the regional and national levels. She questioned what the connection between the Sustainable Development Board and work at the operational level would be.

Noting that in its current form, the institutional structure for sustainable development is incapable of responding to the challenges we are currently facing, the speaker from the UN system said that we need a more flexible dialogue about the added value of the CSD. He said that such a dialogue must focus on how to further implementation. On the Sustainable Development Board, he explained that its aim is to give governments a stronger voice on country level activity.

In conclusion, the Chair noted a good measure of support for a stocktaking exercise, and offered that Stakeholder Forum and its partners could facilitate a process to further think this proposal through. On the second proposal advanced by Stakeholder Forum, he said that there seemed to be a general feeling that any process on strengthening the CSD ought to feed into the already established process on system-wide coherence, rather than establishing a new process.