



EARTH SUMMIT+5

Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise
the Implementation of Agenda 21

Earth Summit Review Ends with Few Commitments Over 50 Heads of State or Government Attend; Some Progress on Climate, Forests, Water

NEW YORK -- World leaders ended a week-long special session of the United Nations General Assembly in the small hours of the morning on 28 June with at least one agreement: five years after the Rio Earth Summit, the planet's health is generally worse than ever. But the final document adopted by delegates from over 165 countries -- while taking small steps forward on a number of issues, including preventing climate change, forest loss and freshwater scarcity -- disappointed many in that it contained few new concrete commitments on action needed.

Fifty-three Heads of State or Government and 65 ministers of environment and other areas attended the session, named Earth Summit+5, from 23 to 27 June, to lend political impetus and visibility to the talks. But, largely because of North-South differences on how to finance sustainable development globally, there were no major breakthroughs.

Ambassador Razali Ismail of Malaysia, current President of the General Assembly, called the results "sobering" and a "wake-up call" for Governments. The lack of agreement on concrete action pointed, he said, "to the enormous difficulties of overcoming short-term and vested interests that would enable concrete commitments to specific targets and to global programmes".

North-South Divisions Dominate

The session was called for to assess progress since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development -- the Earth Summit -- and to set future priorities. While Heads of State and other high-level officials made speeches in the General Assembly Hall, an Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole and many smaller working groups met, under the chairmanship of Dr.



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Mostafa Tolba (Egypt), to hammer out the final document to be adopted by Governments.

It was clear when negotiations began at preparatory meetings in March and April 1997 that North-South differences would dominate the talks, as they had in Rio. In what many saw as a breakdown of the global partnership declared at the Earth Summit, pledges made at Rio by donor countries to increase official development assistance (ODA) and make environment-friendly technologies available on concessional terms had not been kept. Rather, ODA had declined from an average 0.34 per cent of donor country gross national product in 1991 to 0.27 per cent in 1995.

Minister Msuya Waldi Mangachi of Tanzania, speaking for the "Group of 77" representing 132 developing countries, said in an interview that dissension arose because "developing countries were expecting reaffirmation of commitments for financial support made at Rio, while developed-country partners came to fine tune Agenda 21 (the Rio action plan) and add new areas". Negotiations became stalemated, he said, because "we saw those new areas as additional obligations, with no means proposed by donors for implementation and no movement on redressing unfulfilled commitments".

Ambassador Razali noted that, while North-South issues may have overshadowed the meeting, there were also major disagreements among the industrialized countries, for example on a forest treaty and on finance proposals, and within the Group of 77, especially on forest and energy issues.

Continued Deterioration

Based on reports prepared for the session, Governments acknowledged that the global environment has continued to deteriorate since Rio, with rising levels of greenhouse gas emissions, toxic pollution and solid waste. Renewable resources,



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notably fresh water, forests, topsoil and marine fish stocks, continue to be used at rates that are clearly unsustainable.

On the positive side, growth in world population is slowing, food production is still rising, local air and water quality have been improving in many developed countries, and the majority of people are living longer and healthier lives. But the number of people living in poverty has increased, and gaps between rich and poor have grown, both within and between countries.

Comparing this assessment with the lack of a sense of urgency among Governments evident in the session's outcome, one environmental activist, Barbara Bramble of the National Wildlife Federation (USA), commented that there seemed to be a "total disconnect" of diplomacy from reality. Assembly President Razali also expressed his frustration that the nature of diplomatic consensus-building is "too slow, too laborious".

Programme for Agenda 21

The text adopted by consensus at the close of the session -- called a Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 -- contains much carefully worded compromise language to patch over differences. Key elements of the document and other relevant initiatives are summarized below.

Statement of Commitment. Unable to reach agreement on a self-standing political declaration that was to be a popular-style summary of the outcome, delegates substituted a Statement of Commitment as a preamble to the final document. In a brief six paragraphs, Governments reaffirmed Agenda 21 and the principles adopted in Rio, and recommitted themselves to the global partnership established there.

Climate Change. Preparing the way for a December 1997 conference in Kyoto, Japan, at which countries have pledged to strengthen the UN Convention on Climate Change, Governments



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after heated negotiation compromised and agreed to consider "legally binding, meaningful, realistic and equitable targets" for developed countries that will result in "significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions within specified time-frames, such as 2005, 2010 and 2020".

The European Union had sought more specific language -- to reduce emissions by 15 per cent below 1990 levels by 2010 -- and many European leaders, including United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair, challenged the United States to do likewise. Acknowledging that the US produces 20 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions and needs to "do better", US President Bill Clinton pledged to hold a national conference on climate change to build domestic public support for strong action in Kyoto.

Although 166 countries have ratified the Climate Change Convention signed in Rio, only a few developed countries, including the United Kingdom and Germany, are in line to meet the current voluntary targets of reducing emissions to 1990 levels by 2000.

The World Bank expressed its support for "joint implementation" of the Convention -- a contentious concept which would allow developed countries to earn credits for assisting developing countries in reducing their emissions -- and its willingness to launch a Carbon Investment Fund to implement such a scheme, if agreed to in Kyoto.

Forests. The hotly contested debate on forests focused on how to continue the policy dialogue begun in Rio and whether to start negotiations for a legally binding convention. Canada and the European Union strongly favoured a new treaty, but the United States, Brazil, India and most major environment organizations were opposed. In the end it was decided to set up an Intergovernmental Forum on Forests under the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The Forum, which will report back to the CSD in 1999, is to monitor and



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promote implementation of over 130 action proposals made in March 1997 by a UN panel on forests, as well as build consensus for international mechanisms, for example a legally binding instrument.

The World Bank announced that it would work with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to achieve by the year 2000 a network of protected areas amounting to at least 10 per cent of each of the world's forest types.

Financing. Although no new specific financial commitments were made, Governments agreed to a general statement that developed countries should fulfil their commitment made in Rio to reach the UN target of 0.7 per cent of GNP for ODA, and that "intensified efforts" should be made to reverse the downward trend in ODA since 1992. A ministerial-level contact group that had sought to set target dates for ODA increases as part of a finance package ended without agreement.

Donor countries were urged to provide new and additional resources through a "satisfactory" replenishment of the Global Environment Facility.

An international tax on aviation fuel -- proposed by the European Union both to incorporate the hidden environmental costs of air travel and to raise funds for sustainable development -- encountered opposition. Governments agreed that studies should continue on the use of such economic instruments in the aviation sector, and the EU is considering applying the tax within its own region.

A proposal for an intergovernmental panel or process on finance for sustainable development was dropped on the understanding that it would be referred to the UN Economic and Social Council.

Fresh Water. Based on a recent UN assessment of the world's freshwater resources that shows a possible impending water



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crisis, Governments called for discussions at the 1998 session of the Commission on Sustainable Development to consider a global strategy to preserve and protect freshwater supplies. They gave the issue "highest priority" in light of the report's finding that, unless action is taken, by 2025 two thirds of humanity will live in countries facing moderate to severe water stress.

Desertification. It was agreed that Governments should ratify and implement the Convention to Combat Desertification. But while developing countries urged that donor countries provide "new and additional financial resources" to the Global Mechanism to fund the Convention's implementation, developed countries preferred to support a Mechanism that would be able to promote the "mobilization and channeling of substantial resources". Despite protracted talks, a compromise could not be reached and both points of view were reflected in the text. The financing issue is likely to be revisited at the first Conference of Parties to the Convention in September 1997.

Consumption and Production Patterns. An initiative by the European Union on eco-efficiency -- to consider setting a target of achieving a tenfold improvement in productivity in the long-term, with a possible four-fold increase in the next two or three decades -- was agreed after it was specified that the targets were intended for industrialized countries.

Energy. On the contentious issue of energy subsidies and pricing, it was agreed to encourage Governments and the private sector to consider ways to promote internalization of environmental costs in energy prices, and to recognize the need to encourage the reduction and gradual elimination of subsidies that inhibit sustainable development. The need was recognized for "evolving commitments" for the transfer of clean technologies to developing countries. It was also agreed that talks on how to advance sustainable production and use of energy should take place at the CSD in the year 2001, with



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preparations to take place over a longer time-frame within an open-ended intergovernmental group of experts.

Oceans and Seas. Governments agreed on the urgent need to eliminate overfishing and excess fishing capacity, to consider the impact of subsidies to fishing fleets, and to strengthen implementation of existing agreements on marine pollution and sustainable use of oceans.

Poverty. Governments agreed that full implementation of the Social Summit programme of action is essential and listed priority actions. A proposal in the draft political statement that Governments would reduce by half, by the year 2015, the proportion of people living in absolute poverty did not resurface after the statement was dropped.

Institutions. Governments called for an enhanced role and adequate funding for a revitalized UN Environment Programme (UNEP). The 1998-2002 work programme was decided for the Commission on Sustainable Development, which will continue to be the central forum for reviewing implementation of Agenda 21. The next review by the General Assembly was set for 2002. A joint initiative by the Heads of State of Brazil, Germany, Singapore and South Africa, proposing the creation of a global environmental umbrella organization under the UN, with UNEP as a major pillar, was not reflected in any official decisions.

Other Initiatives. Governments agreed to phase out the use of leaded gasoline as soon as possible. They also asked the United Nations to undertake a work programme to promote sustainable tourism, under the CSD.

Participation

If the "spirit of Rio" was dimmed in the negotiating rooms, it seemed fully alive in the hallways, cafes, auditoriums and parks near the General Assembly, where people gathered to network



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and strategize. In addition to over 2,500 Government delegates, about 1,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attended, as well as some 1,000 journalists. Dozens of side events advanced new ideas, and NGOs set up tents in a nearby park for a "global gathering".

For the first time in history, the General Assembly Plenary heard statements by representatives of the "major groups" defined in Agenda 21 -- including NGOs working on behalf of environment and development, women, indigenous people, farmers, trade unions, scientists, local government officials, the private sector and youth.

A Business Roundtable brought together chief executive officers from a dozen corporations with Government Heads and Ministers and the UN Secretary-General to consider how the private sector could be a more active partner in sustainable development.

The active interest of the major groups has been seen by many as one of the best signs of progress since Rio. Over 1,800 cities and towns have drawn up a local Agenda 21, based on the UN document, and some 150 countries have established national councils on sustainable development or similar bodies, many of which bring together Government officials, business executives, environment activists and other major group leaders to recommend national policies.

An Honest Assessment

Reflecting on the session's outcome in his closing speech and press conference, General Assembly President Razali saw the session as an "honest attempt" which did not gloss over the lack of progress. Delegates did not allow the renegotiation of Agenda 21. To do better, he felt, the United Nations must be empowered to deal with "hard-core" economic issues of financial resources, trade and debt, not just "soft issues" of environment,



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development policy and social welfare. And he called on NGOs to "go back to the grassroots" and pressure Governments for "more sincere" implementation of the Rio accords, because "our words have not been matched by deeds".

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