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ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
REPORT

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UNCED - was it all worthwhile?

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Background

I attended UNCED (The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) as an observer from a South African NGO (non government organisation). As an NGO, Group for Environmental Monitoring had participated in the build-up to UNCED - the Women's Conference in Miami, the NGO Conference in Paris where Agenda Ya Wananchi, an alternative Agenda 21, was drawn up, and the 4th Preparatory Committee meeting for UNCED in New York, which I attended. Our participation in most of these events was as part of a regional delegation from southern Africa, in which we linked up with NGOs from the 10 SADCC countries in the region. Within South Africa, we held a workshop in Durban in February, regional follow-up meetings post-New York in May, and will hold a final workshop at the Earthlife Conference on 18 September.

Introduction

UNCED, the biggest conference on earth ended at RioCentro, a specially constructed convention centre outside Rio de Janeiro, on June 14th 1992. Observed by 8 000 members of the press and some 1 500 Non-Government representatives, the UNCED brought together government delegations from over 150 countries to negotiate an "earth charter", and "Agenda 21", a plan for restructuring the world economy to deal with the environmental and development crises facing humanity and its interaction with the planet. At the same time, they discussed conventions on forests, drought, biodiversity and climate change, reaching agreement on climate change and biodiversity.

Simultaneously, the Global Forum took place in Parc de Flamengo in Rio. Some 15 000 non-government organisations (NGOs) - from small citizens's groups to environmental businesses to UN agencies - displayed their projects and discussed ways of promoting sustainable development. Leaders from NGOs around the world debated the way human development - by concentrating wealth and power in the hands of some 20% of the human population while leaving more and more people living in abject poverty - has degraded the earth's resources, and has come to threaten the continuity of life on the planet.

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An assessment of UNCED

Maurice Strong, Secretary General of UNCED, declared that UNCED had been a success. The objectives, of getting a broad declaration on Environment and Development took the form of the Rio Declaration, which made a statement of general commitment; most countries agreed to sign the treaty on climate change, and the treaty on biodiversity. Agenda 21, a programme for Environment and Development, was generally welcomed. And a new UN institution, a Commission on Environment and Development, was established.

Many thousands of words have been written about whether or not the conference was a success. Certainly, compared with the very low level of expectation which was felt at the end of the New York PrepCom, the Rio conference did achieve its objectives. But in terms of setting out a broad vision for human life on the planet in the next century, the sense that compromise and "greenwash" had won the day, predominated.

So if the objective of the "earth summit" is so vital, and so many important leaders came to add their voice, why is there a sense of let down; a sense that this was a carnival which did not accomplish much?

Perhaps the reason lies first, in the lack of vision displayed by world leaders and their diplomats, unable to focus on global as opposed to national interests at UNCED; and second, in the inability of the world's citizens, as represented by NGOs at Rio, to make much real impact on the UNCED process. Youth, indigenous people, farmers, women and citizens groups all committed themselves to working together for a better world. The NGOs drew up a set of alternative treaties to guide their action in the coming decade. But most UNCED delegates remained untouched by the NGO presence, aware of its influence, but isolated from real contact. For example, when the youth representative spoke at the Plenary session of world leaders, her broadcast was cut: the UN would not allow a radical message - share the world, it belongs to the future - to go out on the mass media.

Background to Agenda 21

UNCED has been a 3 year process, initially conceived of as an assessment of progress since the 1972 Brundtland Commission on World Development, which first coined the term sustainable development. Alarmed at the lack of progress towards a more sustainable world order, the present conference grew more and more complicated, as its organisers tried to commit nations to a blueprint of sustainable development.

The cold war may be over, and the threat of nuclear holocaust may have receded, but UNCED testified to a new threat: a deepening schism between the rich countries of the North and the poor countries of the South. Despite compromises, UNCED was divided by issues of over-consumption versus poverty, and by responsibility for environmental degradation versus rights to environmental resources. Unfortunately this North-South divide also disguised from UNCED the immense inequalities within countries.

Agenda 21, UNCED's blueprint for action in all areas relating to sustainable development of the planet, was negotiated between blocks of countries. Agenda 21 is based on a set of themes - revitalisation of economic growth with sustainability, eliminating poverty and achieving sustainable living, the management of human settlements, the efficient use of resources, the management of global and regional resources, and managing chemicals and waste. The final theme is people participation and responsibility. Agenda 21 maintains that to implement programmes of sustainable development, countries have to develop institutional capacity which will require significant new funding.

The North-South Divide

The South, mostly poor countries, grouped together as the "G77", and chaired by Ambassador Marker of Pakistan, managed to form a cohesive lobbying group in which, by and large, they argued from a Southern perspective rather than from individual national interests. This enabled the G77 to get more from UNCED than was at first anticipated, when it was believed that Northern countries, represented especially by the "G7", would dominate. The G7 was weakened by embarrassment over the US position on many issues and by their inability to negotiate on common principles as a result.

With increasing coherence, the G77 argued that the North had destroyed most of the world's natural resources to provide high living standards for its citizens, and was now calling on the South to sacrifice its use of natural resources for development. This was unacceptable, and the North should both change its pattern of consumption, especially regarding the use of energy, and pay for environmental protection in the South.

By the end of UNCED, the G77 had managed to shift the debate to examining the importance of protecting the environment in Northern countries, as well as looking at environment in the South. For example, the forests treaty was initially aimed at protecting tropical forests. It was fiercely resisted by Malaysia and India, among others, as an infringement of their sovereign rights. The Indians argued that a UN treaty was no guarantee that the forests would be protected for the benefit of poor citizens, while Malaysia's argument seemed to focus more on retaining its logging industry. With Southern countries focusing attention on the boreal forests of Northern countries, discussions became bogged down, and no agreement was reached. The climate changed treaty tries to commit Northern countries to limiting their CO2 emissions to 1990 levels by year 2005. The US refused to sign this treaty, claiming that they had the best air pollution record in the world (they are certainly the most effective polluters), but in fact refusing any measure which would limit their capacity for economic growth. The fear is that without effective technological transfer, countries like India and China could become major polluters as they use their substantial coal reserves in a drive for modernisation and industrialisation. While it was agreed that technology transfer was essential, there was less clarity over who should foot the bill.

The US also refused the biodiversity convention because it feared that it would place restrictions on its burgeoning biotechnology industry by opening up the possibility of disputes over patenting genetic material derived from Southern countries. Southern countries argued that without a convention, their wealth in biodiversity would continue to be exploited and overutilised because the value of that biodiversity was accruing to Northern countries, and not to the communities who depended on the forests for their livelihood. Indeed, most countries agreed on the biodiversity convention, which left the US quite isolated. Although a very large part of Agenda 21 is concerned with development, and improving the living conditions of the world's poor, these issues did not receive the same attention at Rio as the ecological issues. The UNCED secretary-general, Maurice Strong, repeatedly emphasised the importance of development issues, and especially the elimination of poverty, in UNCED. The hope is that these issues will be taken up as issues of global concern because of the threat to the environment which will affect everyone.

Funding development and environment programmes.

Millions of people live without clean water, sanitation, adequate food or shelter. The poor, it is argued, are forced to strip the earth of its resources in order to survive. These are conditions which can be changed with the political will to do so, and a sensible investment of resources, and Agenda 21 sets out an international programme for eliminating poverty and protecting the environment.

The cost of implementing Agenda 21 will be incurred primarily in the countries of the South, and will cost an estimated US\$ 500 billion per annum. 75% of this will come from Southern countries themselves. But the remaining US\$ 125 billion per annum has to come from "new and additional" financial aid from the North. The Northern countries argued that all such investment needed to take place through efficient institutions such as the World Bank, which G77 countries rejected.

In the end, a compromise was reached, with the agreement that the World Bank should become more transparent and accountable, and should open participation in the Global Environmental Facility. There was also an agreement that the regional Banks should be strengthened, that the International Development Aid Fund (IDAF) for poorest countries should receive additional finance, and that bilateral aid should continue. Despite agreeing on a mechanism, there was no commitment made to provide these resources. The UNCED Secretariat hoped Japan would take the lead, but the Japanese Prime Minister was unable to leave his own parliament, so we will never know if he intended to make a grand gesture. In the end, Northern countries agreed only to try and achieve the 0,7% of GDP target for development assistance which was set in 1970, by 2000.

UNCED as a Stepping Stone

So, what did the "Earth Summit" achieve? The Rio Declaration, which replaced the "Earth Charter", commits nations to environmental protection and sustainable development. Agenda 21 commits nations to an action plan for sustainable development. We have 2 new environmental conventions to go with the Montreal Protocol on Ozone Depletion, CITES on endangered species and others. The issues of environment and development have certainly been pushed firmly up the international agenda. For Citizens' groups around the world, these are likely to be the dominant issues of the coming decade, replacing the peace movement as the primary global concern. The UN is to set up a new Commission on Environment and Development to plan the implementation of Agenda 21, and those UN institutions concerned with the issues - UNDP and UNHCR are likely to have their roles carefully re-examined. Citizens' groups and NGOs have had their role in world affairs greatly strengthened by UNCED.

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But many issues remain unattended, and perhaps this accounts for a sense of disappointment. UNCED, despite its months of meetings, did not touch the institutions with real power to influence environment and development. GATT and the Bretton Woods institutions are unaffected by UNCED, there is no mention of the transnational corporations or the role of the military in environmental destruction, except to call for a general reallocation of military expenditure. One suspects that George Bush's vehement opposition to much of UNCED, which made the US so unpopular, has little to do with protecting the interests of US citizens, and much to do with maintaining the freedom of the transnationals and the military to do business as usual. Without real fair trade through GATT, and without real change in the way the transnationals behave, UNCED will have limited impact on the immense problems of environment and development. But UNCED will certainly be a stepping stone for Citizens' movements to take up these issues.

The Role of NGOS

One of UNCED's more innovative features was to involve non-government participation across a broad spectrum. Most recognised that NGOs had played an important role in improving the quality of the debates on environment and development, and providing much of the strategic thinking on achieving a new perspective. Some, mostly northern governments, included NGO reps on their official delegation, and others negotiated with organised NGO delegations. UNCED recognised the importance of representatives of women, youth, indigenous people and farmers as 4 categories of people with a special role in sustainable development. The women's lobby from NGOs was particularly effective, and managed to get parts of Agenda 21 strengthened through their tireless efforts. Much of the work of NGOs also took place outside of UNCED, or in reaction to it. From the stage of preparing country papers, NGOs engaged in Formulating alternatives. The example closest to home is Zimbabwe, where there is a government and NGO paper. NGOs were committed to UNCED, and for the more radical, this was uncomfortable, specially as NGO was so broadly defined. Having Councils for Business Development and environmental activists all sitting under the same umbrella was cause for much concern.

NGO Treat; Process

While most NGU effort went into lobbying their own governments to strengthen Agenda 21, eventually the NGOs broke rank, and decided to draw up a set of alternative treaties.

UNCED and the Global Forum provided an amazing opportunity to gain experience of environment and development trends and movements from all over the world. It was very valuable to get experience of participating in a regional caucus group. But at UNCED itself, little clarity emerged as to the direction of future regional cooperation. Perhaps the experience first has to be assimilated and thought through, before proposals can be made. But two major issues emerged for NGOs. First, the African caucus reached the conclusion that building up stronger national participation in the NGO sector was essential before talking about further regional or continental meetings and networking, which had been proposed by the ADB (African Development Bank). Second, the democratisation of environment and development NGOs was also a contentious issue. Like most NGOs at UNCED, the majority of Southern African representatives were from NGOs which don't have a membership base, and broadening participation in environment and development has to involve democratic, membership-based organisations. Getting more and more NGOs, who don't represent anyone, to take part, is not adequate, although there is clearly an important role for research, educational and advocacy institutions to link up. Don't speak on behalf of "the people" was a frequently-voiced criticism, both of South Africans at UNCED/Global Forum and of the NGOs in general. This problem will not be dealt with unless the sector gets better organised, and unless much better preparation takes place. Most South African participation at UNCED, including my own, was far too ad hoc to be effective.

Meeting the Southern African Governments

Towards the end of UNCED, NGOs arranged a meeting with government Ministers to discuss UNCED. This was a very important event which created the possibility for closer cooperation between government and NGOs in future. However, there is still much work that will have to be done to build up trust between parties who, are mutually suspicious.

The government representatives felt UNCED had gone rather better than they feared; Their position on wildlife had been strengthened, there is the promise of more aid and a strengthened regional bank. They also won the promise of a convention on drought and desertification, which would formalise support for times like the current drought.

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These cover a host of topics, starting with an NGO Earth Charter, and treaties on sustainable agriculture, climate change, a youth charter, a treaty with indigenous people, a code of conduct for NGOs, population, food security, transnational corporations, sharing of resources, sustainable cities, fresh water, energy, education for sustainability, consumption and lifestyle, scrubland, fisheries, communication, information and networking, debt, racism, militarism, waste, trade, technology transfer and alternative economic models.

Most of these treaties are general statements of principles, either stronger versions of UNCED documents, or covering areas which UNCED neglected. The climate change treaty, for example, calls for a 25% cutback on 1990 CO2 emissions by 2005, and a overall reduction of 60% as an objectives, compared with achieving 1990 levels in the UNCED Convention.

The treaties are of course voluntary commitments which NGOs make, broadly speaking, to work on the issues and to network with each other. Even informing the general public about these views is a major exercise, and very difficult to achieve except in areas which are not contentious.

The treaties also try to cover institutional arrangements between NGOs, which is perhaps the most difficult area of NGO participation. After all, most NGOs are non-representative, and while there is a general commitment to democracy, sorting out all the thorny issues of who represents whom, could easily destroy the seeming coherence of NGOs focusing on environmental issues. At one point, it was proposed that an NGO council be formed, but this will not be carried through until some of these issues are resolved. Apparently, the next exercise in bringing the NGOs together will be the Global Forum conference in January 1993.

UNCED AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

NGOs from all Southern African countries attended the Global Forum, but only a few countries - notably Zimbabwe and Swaziland, had NGO accreditation and access at UNCED. The NGOs ran a stand at Global Forum and as Southern African NGOs we held an information event, where representatives from 4 or 5 countries spoke. The NGOs met regularly to discuss their participation in the treaty process; in the NGO forum; in the African caucus, and in UNCED.

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The next opportunity for NGOs from the region to meet will be at the South-South land and environment workshop, and then at the September Earthlife conference, where a number of delegates from the region will participate. The need for an ongoing regional network is clear, and with that there is a need for coordination. So, the first proposal from UNCED is to maintain the regional coordinating and networking structures which were established. Within South Africa, this means keeping in place the interinx UNCED Committee, and discussing whether it would be appropriate to broaden the committee's functions.

Second, there is the idea to prepare national and regional "green plans", and a starting point for this would be a position paper on environment and development in South Africa. This needs to involve consultation with government, democratic movement and trade-union movements. Apparently, one target for looking at this process internationally is a Global Forum conference planned for London in 1993.

Third, NGOs should accept that some longer term role in international networking is likely, and take steps to prepare delegates who can represent community-based organisations, as well as enabling professionals to participate where appropriate.

Monitoring Environment and Development

Fourth, there is a role to be played by NGOs in monitoring the implementation of Agenda 21, and specifically the climate change and biodiversity conventions. This would involve, in the first place, studying these documents carefully, and preparing a response to them. Then it would involve getting commitments from government on implementation, and monitoring implementation.

A further monitoring role could be in the implementation of sustainable development policies in South Africa. Assuming that South Africa emerges from its current mire, the economy will have to be reconstructed. Are we to use outdated growth models, or can sustainable development models be user? What this means in detail, and convincing political leaders that such a development strategy is feasible, are major challenges.

The third suggestion is to build a monitoring capacity on environment and development. This involves analysing government positions, those of industry, conservation bodies, etc.

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Both the ANC and PAC participated at UNCED; certainly the ANC was able to slot into the regional African caucuses and to take up common positions on regional issues like debt relief, drought and national conservation policies. On the other hand, many South African specific issues, for example industrial pollution, did not appear to get much attention.

In general South African participation at UNCED was bitty and, while it was important that some representatives were there, there is obviously an enormous amount of work to be done in creating the framework for implementing Agenda 21, and ensuring that the work that is done on environment and development is participatory and democratic.

For a number of countries, UNCED was an opportunity to develop environmental policy. Namibia, for example, used the funding available for the preparation of a country paper to prepare a "Green Plan"; Zimbabwe prepared both a government and NGO paper. From other regions Pakistan's National Conservation Strategy is considered something of a model. It was prepared in close co-operation with IUCN. It may be useful to study some of these reports to see what lessons they hold.

There seems little doubt that future policy on environment and development will be made at international level. For South Africa - government or NGO - to participate in that policy formulation it will have to commit significant resources to the process. For NGOs this is a difficult question, especially if efforts in the sector are dispersed and uncoordinated. If we want to participate, we have to be able to set clear objectives of what we want to achieve and strategise how to achieve that, else we are likely to be more on the receiving end of policy, not the active participants in creating conditions which promote sustainable development. There is also the danger that this kind of international participation can amount to bureaucratization, and can stifle the dynamic work being done by activist groups on issues of sustainable development.

From an NGO perspective, the Women's Forum and the Youth initiatives emerged as the most positive and best organised. Overall, the NGOs were not able to go beyond a loose networking agreement. There was a suggestion made to establish a new International Association of Environmental and Development NGOs, but this was shelved because any questions of democratic participation, structure etc. could not be resolved. Whereas southern African NGOs at New York seemed to benefit from working closely together, at Rio the Global Forum was too diffuse, too many ideas competing with each other for NGOs to make plans to work closely together. Perhaps a clearer picture of regional cooperation will emerge in the months to come.

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Developing Policy capacity on Environment and Development is a critical need, not only in government, but also in the NGO sector. This could dovetail with a training function to help NGOs, civics and youth movement inform other members and implement environment and development functions. More strategic use of media could be helpful.

Ongoing international networking - identifying key international institutions and or individuals and building links with such bodies. To do this effectively computerized networking seems essential, since most of the key players are using it. But, communication generally is a key and it requires investment in time and resources. Cooperation could take place around specific issues, for example monitoring toxic waste movements, cooperating on pesticide research, protesting international movement of nuclear waste, or implementing new agreements on common property management.

Cooperation in the arena (3f land tuwe and conservation. Given the degree of interest in these areas in southern Africa, it seems an appropriate field for ongoing work. Cooperation with IUCN at the international level, and with the sustainable agriculture network, would be ways of pursing regional and international interests in the field. For South Africa, with the possibility of a land reform programme being introduced a great deal could be shared with other countries.

Although I have argued in this paper in favour of international cooperation, and although the trend to internationalism is strong, there is also a need to approach the work cautiously. First, cooperation needs to take place from a strong base. In many ways, the best way to participate internationally is to build a strong environment and development movement in South Africa first. International support and cooperation cannot substitute for that organisation. NGOs need to build up cooperation with each other, learn to work with government, and especially, build up grass roots involvement, if participation is to be nmaningful. With this frame work, NGOs need to assess their roles in a future NGO - UNCED framework.