Regional Preparations for WSSD

by Michael A. Buenker*

Ten years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, preparations on the national, regional and international level are underway for an assessment of progress achieved. This review shall take place at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa from 26 August to 4 September 2002. Following the first session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-10) acting as Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for WSSD, governments have focused their efforts on drafting up national assessments on sustainable development which have flowed into the respective sub-regional meetings. Regional Roundtables of Eminent Persons from politics and science have also taken place. Five Regional Ministerial Meetings in preparation for WSSD were convened from September to November 2001, organised by the corresponding UN Regional Economic Commissions and UNEP offices. The mandate of all these Regional PrepComs was to outline key policy issues, priorities and follow-up actions and to provide substantial inputs to the preparatory processes for the Summit. The emphasis was not on setting the agenda for WSSD, which will be done in CSD, but on identifying regional priorities.

All five Regional PrepComs produced Assessment Reports on Progress Achieved since Rio, and some form of a Statement or Platform which outlines key areas for follow-up. Across the board, all regions agreed on the general questions, which are to be addressed at Johannesburg 2002.

The Ministerial Conference was divided into four sessions at the PrepCom, which is reprinted on page 58.

Latin America and the Caribbean

The Regional Preparatory Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean was held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from 23 to 24 October 2001 at the Rio Centro – the very same venue where UNCED took place – and was organised by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the UNEP Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (ROLAC). It was attended by a total of 35 government delegations from the region, including States not associated with ECLAC, as well as by representatives from the UN system, other intergovernmental bodies and civil society. The meeting was preceded by four sub-regional meetings for the Southern Cone, the Caribbean, the Andean and Meso-America, which were held during June and July. The major outcome of the meeting was the adoption of the Rio de Janeiro Platform for Action on the Road to Johannesburg 2002.

Immediately prior to the PrepCom, the 13th Forum of the Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean assembled in Rio from 22 to 23 October 2001, in order to adopt a Regional Environmental Plan of Action for the period from 2002 to 2005 and to review the draft texts for consideration of the Preparatory Conference. A special topic under discussion was the “environmental agenda in the new global context” in view of the terrorist attacks of 11 September.

A preparatory Meeting of Latin America and the Caribbean Civil Society Networks was also held in Rio from 18 to 20 October. However, many participating non-governmental organisations (NGOs) complained that this meeting was scheduled too far in advance of the PrepCom, thereby making it unlikely that government officials would attend. In addition, they felt excluded from the process of developing the Platform, as they were not given an opportunity to comment on the draft text. In fact, many of them had not even been invited to the PrepCom.

The Ministerial Conference was divided into four seg-

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ments. On 23 October, the meeting began with a High-level Panel on Financing Sustainable Development, followed by a Special Session in which Brazilian President Fernando Henrique addressed the Plenary. Among other issues, President Cardoso emphasised in light of recent events in the US that “terrorism must not gag the agenda for international cooperation”. The second day opened with a discussion on a document prepared by ECLAC and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) entitled “the Sustainability of Development in Latin America and the Caribbean: Challenges and Opportunities” which serves as the Regional Assessment Report. The meeting then ended with the adoption of the Platform.

The Rio de Janeiro Platform for Action is divided into four sections: a) reaffirmation of principles and commitments; b) obstacles and lessons learned; c) present considerations; and d) future commitments. Among future commitments were listed:
1. Institutional Structure for Sustainable Development.
2. Financing and Technology Transfer.
3. Formulations of Actions.

The first two points were the major areas of discussion during the PrepCom. In line with Principle 10 of Agenda 21, the section on Institutional Structure calls for greater involvement of public and private institutions and for them to be given a stronger role in decision-making processes through the creation of national sustainable development councils. A “lasting strategic alliance” between government and civil society actors should also be formed for capacity building at the local, national and regional level. This was also a theme of President Cardoso’s speech, in which he stated, with a view to establishing the foundation for a future based on sustainable development, that the State cannot presume that it can do all this without civil engagement: it requires a State based on the principles of transparency and participatory democracy in order to allow for cooperation at all levels of government, as well as more NGO involvement.

The second point, as evinced by the convening of the High-level Panel on Financing Sustainable Development, was the dominant theme of the proceedings as the primary focus was on the economic situation of the region. Special attention was given to the upcoming International Conference for Financing Development (to be held at Monterrey, Mexico, from 18 to 22 March 2002) which is divided into two parts: a) reaffirmation of principles and commitments; b) obstacles and lessons learned; c) present considerations; and d) future commitments. Among future commitments were listed:
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the Chair of the Executive Bureau of CAMRE, proposed the establishment of an Arab Council for Sustainable Development at a ministerial level. He also called for the creation of a regional financial mechanism for financing sustainable development, which could act as a role model for a global mechanism. The delegation of Jordan later encouraged other Arab states to establish national Councils for Sustainable Development, and this was seconded by Syria, Tunisia and Palestine. However, Iraq pointed out that this does not fit in with the documents under discussion, since they pertain only to regional affairs.

Due to the brief nature of the proceedings – which has been described as no more than a formal signing ceremony – very limited opportunity was given to civil society actors to address or to engage in an interactive discussion with the State delegations who were present. However, the fact that NGOs were present was viewed as a step in the right direction. The final Arab Declaration to the World Summit on Sustainable Development also acknowledges a constraint that "relatively limited experience of civil society in participating in the process of development and implementation of sustainable development programmes and activities."

The three documents that were adopted during the West Asian PrepCom were the Assessment Report, Arab Declaration and Ministerial Address to WSSD. The Assessment Report and Ministerial Address are still open for comment and will be further discussed in the forthcoming Arab Summit at Beirut, Lebanon on 4 March 2002. The Arab Declaration, which is largely based on the Abu Dhabi Declaration adopted by CAMRE on 3 February 2001, is divided into three parts where, first, the constraints to achieving sustainable development are listed; second, the challenges and opportunities within the region are outlined; and third, recommendations for action on a regional, as well as an international, level are given.

Among other issue areas, the document emphasises the effective use of natural resources, especially in relation to water management. The Declaration was also praised for drawing attention to consumption and production patterns and governance at the national level, which was only briefly touched upon in other Regional PrepComs. As for peace and security-related aspects of the environment, the Ministerial Declaration calls for an integrated pan-Arab strategy aimed at "abolishing foci of tension and weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East on just bases." This is a lofty aspiration, considering the history of the region, since it entails the realisation that ongoing military conflicts prevent sustainable development and eat up resources which could be better used for human development. In addition, it stymies cooperation on cross-boundary water management projects, which this Region is so dearly in need of.

Asia and the Pacific

The High-level Regional Meeting for Asia and the Pacific took place at Phnom Penh, Cambodia from 27 to 29 November 2001 and was organised by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) with support from the UNEP and UNDP Regional Offices, as well as the Asian Development Bank. It was attended by close to 200 delegates from 46 ESCAP member states and over 220 representatives from UN agencies, other intergovernmental organisations and civil society institutions. Given the vast geographic size and population of the region, preparations for the Asia-Pacific PrepCom began very early and can be traced back to the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development for Asia and the Pacific held in Kitakyushu, Japan from 31 August to 5 September 2000 where a first Regional Message for the 10-Year Review of UNCED was adopted. In order to capture the cultural diversity present and different stages of economic development involved, sub-regional activities were launched on 16 May 2001 with the first Regional Roundtable for Central Asia. Two other Roundtables for East Asia and the Pacific Region and the Central Asia and South Asia Region followed, as well as a total of five sub-regional meetings which took place from July to October.

The Regional PrepCom opened with the Asia-Pacific Roundtable on Sustainable Development on 27 December in which reports of the Eminent Persons’ Roundtables and sub-regional meetings were heard and stakeholders were invited to comment. A Chairman’s summary of these proceedings was made available, but unfortunately not in time for it to be integrated into the final text of the Regional Platform. A special session on Financing Sustainable Development was also held in which panellists gave presentations and opened the round for discussion. These two events were similar to the Regional PrepCom for Europe and North America, where civil society actors were invited to participate in interactive dialogues with State representatives and UN officials. However, this did not meet the CSD Multi-Stakeholder formula, as very few representatives from labour organisations, indigenous peoples or the private sector were present.

The actual High-level Regional Meeting began on the afternoon of 28 November during which the Cambodian
Prime Minister Hun Sen gave an inaugural address reflecting upon his own country’s progress toward sustainable development. Representatives of States, the UN system, other intergovernmental bodies and civil society then proceeded to issue statements on the key documents under consideration. All along, informal consultations among State delegates on the Phnom Penh Regional Platform on Sustainable Development, which had begun the day before, continued in parallel, and thus the input by NGOs was sparsely considered in the final document. Negotiations were conducted in marathon sessions, which lasted into the early hours. The finished Platform was then adopted by the Plenary, with only a few minor changes, during the closing session on 29 November.

The Platform is divided into four segments: 1) Regional Assessment of the Implementation of Agenda 21; 2) Key Issues and Priorities for Sustainable Development; 3) Follow-up Actions; and 4) A separate heading for Financing Sustainable Development. Among the Follow-up Actions is an affirmation of achieving international development goals and targets set by the Millennium Declaration.

Specific initiatives by the Asia-Pacific region are listed in the following:

1. Capacity-building for Sustainable Development.
2. Poverty Reduction for Sustainable Development.
3. Cleaner Production and Sustainable Energy.
4. Land Management and Biodiversity Conservation.
5. Protection and Management of and Access to Freshwater Resources, Oceans, Coastal and Marine Resources and Sustainable Development of Small Island States.
6. Action on Atmosphere and Climate Change.

Implementation mechanisms for national, regional/sub-regional and global levels are also listed among the Follow-up Actions.

The overall process demonstrates the difficulty of applying the “bottom-up” approach to the preparatory process of WSSD as mandated by CSD. As mentioned earlier, many countries that attended the Regional meetings had not yet concluded their national reports. Observers to the Asia-Pacific meeting also lamented that the results of the Sub-regional meeting had not been effectively integrated into the Regional Platform. This is the same problem the International PrepCom process is confronted with, since it is working under similar time constraints and thus had to start with its global assessment while the national and regional processes were just being launched.

Notes:

1. An overview of the outcomes of the preparatory processes at the national, regional and international levels is available at http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/. A summary overview of the Regional PrepComs prepared by the CSD bureau is also available there. The Regional Ministerial Statements are reprinted in International Protection of the Environment: Conservation in Sustainable Development, Oceana Publications, Dobbs Ferry, New York.