

EDITORIAL

Firstly, we should say that this is not an Editorial as such, but just comments on the Conference, in no particular order.

Large numbers of people - and perhaps many of our readers - have not yet made up their minds about the results from Rio.

As with most things, the evaluation depends on the observation point. Scarcely anyone has actually read what has been agreed in the documents, so most people are not in a position to make a judgement. This cannot be made until the hundreds of papers have been studied closely.

*It is generally agreed that the Conference has been an important exercise for all and that what has come from the meetings is not as important as the dialogue itself. However, even if there is some truth in this, that surely cannot have been the *raison-d' être* of such a gathering. So the central question is what will happen now. No-one expects that things will change over-night. Provided that lessons are learned correctly from the two years preparatory work, the world will be better placed to tackle the problems arising in the future. The Preparatory Committees, meeting over many weeks (one organisational and four substantive sessions) and the Conference itself, have served as a platform to discuss environmental concerns at the highest levels, and have brought poverty and development issues back on to the international agenda. In this respect, valuable papers have been produced which will always serve as invaluable references to development planners. As Rio is to be the start, rather than the end of the process, then the strength of the continuing machinery will be crucial.*

Few events have captured the world's imagination as the Conference did, and the media coverage, both positive and negative, was exceptionally high. Public awareness for the complexities of the problem has been heightened and this will be of inestimable value for their solutions. Nonetheless, it will not be possible to assess correctly the impact of Rio on the public and the willingness to make financial or other "sacrifices" to this end. Although UNCED's job was not to deliver a meaningful agreement in relation to the huge debt repayments, commodities, and structural adjustment programmes - which directly affect developing countries' poverty - action on these points must be undertaken quickly, if a serious attempt is to be made to solve the world's problems of under-development and environmental destruction.

One UNCED delegate put the situation thus: "In searching for solutions to the problems we face, we have developed a process that is, in itself, part of the solution....That is what the UNCED process means in terms of our future survival". We can only hope that he is right.

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The Conference was very specific in some things. Plenary dealt mainly with the statements: At first, those of the delegations and then those of the Heads of State and Government in the Summit segment, all of which were limited to seven minutes duration. This limitation was not appreciated by Heads of States, who had to shorten, at short notice their already-short papers! But without this time-limit, the Conference would still be sitting! In this connection, we were witness to the comment of someone who had seen his Head of State on television, speaking for a very short time, and who asked if the said politician had really spent so much money and effort for this brief appearance - or if he had nothing more to say on the environment!

Extracts from the "selected promises" are printed on page 226. We have not divided the Statements between the general debate in Plenary and the Summit segment. In the interests of simplicity, we have put the extracts from each State together and have had to be subjective, otherwise we would have had two volumes of speeches alone. States are listed alphabetically, followed by the GOs and NGOs. We did not

receive the texts of all the speeches - for example, we have not that of Fidel Castro (even Bush applauded!) - and would have been glad to have received several others. So readers will understand that if their State is not represented, it is due to the missing text.

In this connection we should mention how difficult it was to obtain any of the papers in Rio. One example will suffice: During the last meeting, a bound edition of the four parts of Agenda 21 was presented to the delegates. Many thought that this was the final, amended version of the text, which started a general stampede to net one of them. But no, this was the conference draft, bound before the Conference, unfortunately forgotten during negotiations, and distributed in hundreds of copies at the final meeting!

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All negotiations took place in the Main Committee, chaired by Ambassador Tommy Koh. Some points were handed over to the negotiating groups to report back, and then all the substantive work - the amendments and the lifting of the brackets - was done in the actual Committee. All decisions thus appeared only in the proceedings of the Main Committee. In the plenary, these problems were not dealt with at all - it finally approved the Committee decisions.

At one point, many delegates were convinced that the work-load would never be completed by the Main Committee in the time set, and had thought that the Conference would have to be prolonged. Following a discussion on this point, Tommy Koh stated categorically that it was "no day more," and in the end, this pressure saved time, costs and produced quicker results. Perhaps the results could have been better formulated, but there is no guarantee that lengthier discussions would have brought real improvements.

In the report you will be reminded that the Conference had to decide on the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 and the Forest Principles, but not on the Conventions. They had been negotiated in two separate Committees (INCs), and concluded shortly before Rio. Everybody was holding out until the end to get as much as possible.

The same was the case for Agenda 21 and the two conventions. To compromise too early would have appeared to have been wrong to those who were taking part in the negotiations. As the highest political level had already announced their attendance at Rio, the Heads of Delegations held out that the former should not only take the final decision but also shoulder the responsibility.

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Concerning the organisation of such conferences, the UN will have to re-think its strategy throughout the system vis-à-vis such mammoth gatherings. It is known that the list of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who work permanently and closely in collaboration with the UN system is not too long. However, to be fair to all NGOs and to avoid the accusation of favouritism, practically all those who applied (nearly 2000) were accredited to UNCED. In fact, the effect of this was self-defeating for the NGOs. Due to problems of space, the rights of those organisations accredited to the UN had to be limited and access was given to those who were first in the queue. A "democratic" decision which meant that those who had time to queue or park someone in the queue, were able to block entrance for the small, active ones.

The NGOs permanently accredited to the UN system, the experienced people who knew how to act in UN meetings in order to achieve something, were hampered by the mass. Thus, the well-known UN rules for participation of NGOs were partially suspended, due to the number who were accredited this time. The only solution would be to divide the NGOs into two groups - those who can prove permanent support of the UN system and those who for just one occasion wish to be at the party.

Some Governments had been hesitant to accredit so many NGOs as they feared the resulting chaos. Obviously, the accreditation was a way to limit their participation!

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Some people were surprised that the whole chapter of Agenda 21 on climate came to Rio in brackets. This was understandable for those involved, since the climate convention had not been concluded when the last PrepCom finished in New York, so that this chapter could not be brought into conformity with the Convention. The same was the case for the Biodiversity Convention and the relevant chapters in Agenda 21.

Some, but not all, of the OPEC countries opposed the climate part of the relevant chapter in Agenda 21. Many thought this to be a case of the rich oil countries being contra, but this was not so simple. Some of the countries concerned have a genuine conflict of interests at home. Usually, the environmental administration is in favour of world-wide limitations to CO₂ emissions, while the State is totally dependent on oil for major income. These countries will be more able to accept change when they achieve further diversification in their economy.

Switzerland introduced an initiative that like-minded States should achieve consensus on a further-reaching agreement with regard to CO₂, but found little support for this. Some Heads of Delegation openly said that there should be no further attempt to provoke the US in this regard. It is also known that the US delegation informed the Head of the Swiss delegation, Minister Cotti, of their displeasure over this initiative. Now the details will have to be decided upon - hopefully, soon.

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The NGO Global Forum ("Alternative Summit"), passed about 30 "conventions" and action plans covering everything from world trade, alternative economic models, consumption, lifestyle, to the battle against corruption. A major discussion concerned the savings on the military budget and the fact that this was not on the UNCED agenda. However, it neglected to acknowledge that if a State agrees to a compromise on finance, it is already taking into account what it is saving on expenditure. There was also NGO discussion on the possibility of establishing mechanisms for world-wide compliance on agreements. However, the resulting papers showed clearly that more lawyers should have been included in the drafting process!

There was a financial shortage for the Forum of \$2 million dollars. It was feared that it would have to close, as some service industries had reduced their personnel and for some hours the electricity supply was cut off. Due to some generous donations from the national TV station - in addition to help from the United Kingdom, France and Germany, the minus was settled at the last moment. In this connection we should mention that Prime Minister Major issued an invitation for a world-wide conference of NGOs in London.

In general, it can be said that this "alternative summit" succeeded for the first time in creating closer ties between a diversity of organisations from traditional conservation associations on a wide scale and so-called fringe groups.

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The traditional political "blocs" of North/South were no longer in evidence. There are now three blocs - the industrialised States, the developing countries and the countries "in economic transition". And often these blocs are not in full conformity among themselves.

The former socialist countries did not want to be termed "developing" and the developing countries understandably did not want to accept them into their fold.

The acceptance of this third bloc was promoted by the promise of some industrialised countries that they would help those countries in economic transition without decreasing aid to developing countries. Germany was one of those countries who made such a promise, although it has a special burden with its part of the former soviet bloc.

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The problems of national sovereignty came again to the fore. Clearly, when world responsibility is accepted for environmental danger, some States have difficulty in accepting that this will also entail giving up some of their rights and accepting new responsibilities. On the one hand, this is understandable. On the other, all States have to accept that we have only one earth and that such sensitive aspects can only be solved with compromise on both sides. This problem kept arising in several contexts - for example, the Malaysian Head of Delegation stated already at the start of the Conference that any renunciation of the right to cut its forests was not acceptable, if there was no chance that developed countries would compensate fully for all such reductions.

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You will see that there will be a convention on desertification (see page 212). This idea came from the Africans, and some people opposed it, stating that it would just become a camouflaged request for more funding. But following discussions with experts concerning what could be regulated between States in this area, it was clear that it would not be a very broadly drawn convention, but a very specific one. In the meantime, it has been decided that the convention will deal with the world-wide problem of creeping desertification.

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The problems concerning technology transfer were ever-present and also an important point in the Biodiversity Convention (see page 251) After the G77 had shown some lee-way, OECD countries became more co-operative. Open is still to what extent and in what form transfer of technology will be "obligatory" - if this will be possible in one way or another, i.e., for privately-owned technology. This also involves the new developments discussed, for example, in the GATT dossier on trade and intellectual property rights.

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The subject of "Financial Resources" kept arising, especially throughout the Agenda 21 discussions and the insistence of the G77 and China that aid should be increased to 0.7% of GNP. This was the basis of a decision, but we do not want to repeat here what we have said in the extensive section in the report on page 293.

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Discussion concerning the Forest Principles (see page 269) was on two aspects, which made the situation difficult from the beginning:

- During the PrepCom process a group from the industrialised countries pushed for a binding document very fast. Several arguments were brought against this: the developing countries said that they had no extra available staff to negotiate a third convention concurrently, which was undoubtedly the truth. Quite a number of delegations referred to the fact that the negotiations on the Biodiversity Convention also included forests and that a binding instrument containing forest principles could not be discussed parallel to this, but only afterwards. Now, since the US did not sign the Biodiversity Convention, many people feel that the US push for a forests convention was perhaps a tool to prevent the conclusion of a biodiversity convention.

Many developing countries had been shocked that activist groups in developed countries had advocated a boycott on the import of all tropical wood, not taking into account that this would make the poor, poorer. The decision concerning the ivory trade reminded them that too many States too easily make collective, rather than selective, decisions in prohibiting all trade of some goods without dividing between those who just exploit and those who sustainably use a resource.

The Principles were negotiated until the very last moment and it was very uncertain if this document would be accepted at all. However, under the able leadership of the Ambassador of Guyana and with last-minute help from the German Environment Minister, a breakthrough was achieved. (See also under point on national sovereignty).

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There was very tight security outside the Conference compound, with police and soldiers in addition to helicopters circling overhead. But this, however, was not the case once you were inside the compound. For this reason it was not difficult for someone to demolish one of the glass entrance doors to the plenary building. Some people were led away in handcuffs and one of them told the UN security officer that he was sorry to trouble him, but if they had not created such an incident, there would have been no press coverage for their cause.

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The term "Rio Declaration" is probably better than the term "Earth Charter" since it makes clear from where it comes and on what occasion, as with the Stockholm Declaration. On the other hand, what is needed and was requested by some delegations, is that - following the example of the development of the Human Rights Declaration - all the needed principles concerning the environment should be put in a binding covenant.

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The US position was made clear by President Bush and was generally thought to be both defensive and arrogant. He said that his Government is doing more than the Biodiversity Convention is asking for. Later he did not turn up at the "Summit table" where EPA Administrator, William Reilly, represented him.

The latter's situation was confusing, to say the least. He has long been well-known in the environment movement as a progressive, and many people could not understand his continued patience in accepting such a situation. Admittedly, it is hard for an outsider to judge the reasons why someone would appear to be acting differently than expected. Unsolved was the leaking of a confidential memorandum from Reilly to President Bush, in which he said that the US should agree to what he called "minor modifications" of the Biodiversity Treaty to alleviate international criticism of Washington's refusal to sign the document. This gave rise to all sorts of speculation - not only in the media - and a furious President Bush said that if he could find the leaker he would be fired on the spot.

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It is very important now in the context of what has been decided on implementation in the Rio decisions that the details concerning the composition, organisation and seat of the Commission on Sustainable Development (see page 297) should be decided during the 47th session of the UN General Assembly. Although it was generally felt that the decision on the Commission is an important one, it was known that some Governments were still doubtful how such a decision should be taken. Some needed a lot of convincing in this direction. However, it is necessary, because the review of the implementation of the results of Rio will stand or fall with this decision.

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So many compliments have been showered on Maurice Strong, that it would be presumptuous to repeat these here. But recognition of the masterly running of the Main Committee by Tommy Koh has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Without his stage-managing of proceedings, much less work would have been finished in Rio.

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With these compliments we are concluding our comments, which are meant as an introduction to the following report.

Our last advice, not only for your evaluation of the results, but also in the interests of the implementation of what has been achieved, is to read properly the circa 800 pages on which consensus has been reached, word by word !

- Wolfgang R. Streuss -

30 July 1992

Marlene Jahake