

UNITED NATIONS ACTIVITIES

UN/GA

Special Session on Small Island Developing States

The Special Session of the General Assembly for the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) convened in New York from 27–28 September 1999.

The Special Session adopted a political declaration and a text on the state of initiatives for the future implementation of the Programme of Action (POA). It also forwarded a draft resolution on the Caribbean Sea to the regular session of the General Assembly for further consideration.

Background

The Programme of Action was adopted at the UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in 1994, in Barbados (see *Environmental Policy and Law*, Vol. 24, No. 5 at page 226). The Conference had its roots in Chapter 17 of Agenda 21 and was established by UN General Assembly Resolution 47/189. The POA identifies priority areas and indicates specific actions that are necessary to address the special challenges faced by SIDS.

The seventh session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) convened on 23 and 30 April 1999 as a preparatory committee for the Special Session on SIDS (see *Environmental Policy and Law* Vol. 29, No. 2 at pages 91 and 145).

On 23 April, the CSD's High-Level Segment discussed the POA's implementation, difficulties met and lessons learned, and suggested elements for the Special Session's outcome. On 30 April, the CSD considered preparations for the comprehensive review of the Programme of Action. It approved and recommended the draft provisional agenda and organisational matters for adoption by the Special Session of the General Assembly. The CSD also adopted an oral decision recommending that the General Assembly authorize it to hold a resumed session for two days in September in order to complete its work. A revised draft of the Chair's compilation document on the "State of Progress and Initiatives for the Future Implementation of the Programme of Action" and a draft Declaration resulted from informal consultations.

The CSD held a resumed session from 9–10 September 1999. Delegates continued to work on an informal document containing texts entitled "Draft Declaration" and "State of Progress and Initiatives for the Future Implementation of the POA."

Opening Session

On 27 September, Martin Andjaba (Namibia) opened the 22nd Special Session of the General Assembly. The

Plenary then elected the President of the 54th General Assembly, Theo-Ben Gurirab (Namibia), to preside over the Special Session.

During the course of the meeting, delegates met in five Plenary sessions. The Special Session established an Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole (COW), which met in two parallel sessions to the Plenary.

General Debate

The debate focused on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Programme of Action.

Many delegates said SIDS were meeting the commitments they made in Barbados but deplored the failure of the international community to do the same. Following is a selection of some of the contributions to the general debate:

Guyana, on behalf of the G-77/China, said discussions at the Special Session would serve to highlight SIDS' special needs and to focus attention of the international community on the problems and constraints SIDS face to achieve sustainable development.

Samoa, on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), indicated that SIDS have done their best to implement the Programme of Action. He said that participants at this session should ask themselves whether their message to the world about SIDS was a powerful one and whether the international community truly shared a common vision for the future.

Finland, on behalf of the European Union, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, highlighted the following emerging concerns for SIDS: continuing deterioration of the marine environment; freshwater and land degradation: increased frequency and severity of natural disasters; economic difficulties due to external factors; and the expansion of globalisation, which puts SIDS at risk of economic marginalisation. The speaker said that national and regional sustainable development strategies should include strengthening human and institutional capacities, and be oriented towards poverty eradication and gender balance. She stressed forging partnerships with the private sector and other major actors. The speaker identified the Lomé Convention as the centrepiece of cooperation with SIDS and stressed ensuring the successor to the Lomé Convention as well as the Millennium Round of the WTO negotiations would further reduce trade barriers and provide SIDS with more secure access to export markets.

Jamaica listed what it saw as the priority issues: development of a vulnerability index; special consider-

ation within UNCTAD and the WTO of vulnerabilities and limitations that undermine SIDS' efforts to participate in the global marketplace; increased ODA; addressing the effects of global warming; protection of marine resources from land and ship generated pollution; capacity building; a participatory approach and public education programmes; transfer of technology; and poverty eradication programmes.

However, some delegates from non-SIDS developing countries expressed concern over the vulnerability index and the emergence of a special SIDS status, which could result in a fragmented globalisation process rather than a homogeneous international community.

Greece supported the development of a comprehensive vulnerability index, and emphasised the need to reverse the downward trend in ODA. It called on the international community to work cooperatively with governments, the private sector, AOSIS and regional groups such as CARICOM/CARIFORUM, the South Pacific Forum and the Indian Ocean Commission to enhance efforts to assist SIDS.

France noted that effective implementation of the Programme of Action had been hindered by SIDS' economic difficulties and a lack of skilled human resources and administrative capacities and indicated that implementation would occur only if SIDS assume their individual responsibilities, focusing on their national and regional sustainable development strategies.

Ireland condemned the shipment of transboundary wastes. It supported SIDSNet as a useful instrument to bridge the distances among SIDS and expressed concern over the lack of precision as to the definition of vulnerability.

The issue of transboundary movement of hazardous and radioactive wastes that threaten the livelihood of SIDS was a contentious one and participants had feared that this would take up a lot of time during the Special Session. However, delegates informally negotiated and agreed to a compromise text before the first meeting of the Committee of the Whole. Although the text on hazardous waste was adopted, some delegates had the perception that the final document contained weaker language than the Programme of Action, which highlights SIDS' right to regulate, restrict and/or ban importation of hazardous substances and to prohibit transboundary movement of hazardous and radioactive wastes.

The Netherlands said that limits to economies of scale and lack of diversity of communications result in a one-sided production structure for SIDS, which leaves the vulnerable to external influences. Regarding climate change, the speaker said that SIDS should clearly articulate their needs for financial, institutional and scientific assistance through the national communications within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Committee of the Whole

John Ashe (Antigua and Barbuda) chaired the COW. It considered the reports forwarded by the CSD contain-

ing a draft Declaration and a document on the State of Progress and Initiatives for the Future Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS. The Committee also considered a draft resolution on the Caribbean Sea as a special area for sustainable development, originally proposed by the G-77/China and Mexico.

During its two sessions, the Committee heard speeches from international organisations.

UNDP, for example, highlighted its commitment to capacity building in critical areas of the Programme of Action, including the establishment of SIDSNet. The FAO presented its Plan of Action on Agriculture in SIDS, along with a Ministerial Declaration on Agriculture in Small Island Developing States. UNEP said SIDS are a microcosm of the challenges facing all nations. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) explained that this organisation, jointly with CARICOM, undertook a role in the coordination of implementing POA activities.

Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Programme of Action

On 27 September, the Committee addressed the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS and had before it the recommendations and report of the CSD, acting as the preparatory body for the Special Session.

The Chair noted agreement on text regarding hazardous waste in the Declaration. The Committee agreed to the Declaration and recommended its adoption by the Special Session.

Draft Resolution on the Caribbean Sea

The draft resolution proposes to declare the Caribbean Sea a special area in the context of sustainable development. This issue was so contentious that delegates were not even willing to discuss it, preferring to defer the topic to the Second Committee of the General Assembly for further consideration. Many countries did not want to proceed with discussions until they had had enough time to analyse the legal implications of the proposal or of the possible conflicts it might have with international agreements such as that of the Law of the Sea. Not all delegates could understand why it should be declared a special area and even a few Caribbean countries questioned the economic implications it could have regarding resource exploitation and trade. Some developed countries were opposed to the proposal because it might affect their rights of passage and thought it might set a precedent for other areas.

The EU noted specific challenges faced by Caribbean countries and said UNCLOS should be a framework for reference and the work of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) should be taken into account.

Guyana, on behalf of the G-77/China, looked forward to further negotiations on the resolution in the Second Committee. ➤

The Marshall Islands hoped for a speedy conclusion of negotiations and adoption of the resolution in the Second Committee.

The Committee of the Whole took note of the draft resolution and recommended that the Special Session forward it to the Second Committee for further consideration.

The draft resolution in its current form contains alternative titles, one of which recognises the Caribbean Sea as a special area in the context of sustainable development, and the other which focuses on promoting an integrated management approach to the Caribbean Sea in the context of sustainable development.

The text reaffirms the principles embodied in the Rio Declaration and the Programme of Action, as well as UNCLOS. A need was identified to reference the IMO in the text. It states that the Caribbean Sea is mostly comprised of SIDS and affected by, *inter alia*, their limited capacity, narrow resource bases need for financial resources, social problems, high poverty levels and challenges and opportunities of globalisation. (There is a bracketed reference to the vulnerability of SIDS in this context.)

Closing Plenary

Delegates considered the report of the Committee of the Whole. This report contained a provision stating that the General Assembly adopt the Declaration and the document on the State of Progress and Initiatives for the Future Implementation of the Programme of Action, which the Plenary duly adopted.

Plenary also agreed to forward the draft resolution on the Caribbean Sea to the Second Committee for further consideration under the agenda item "Environment and Sustainable Development."

Finland, on behalf of the EU, said it would have preferred to see more precise reference to the least developed countries among SIDS in the Declaration.

The US offered an explanation of its position and requested that its statement be included verbatim in the record of the session. The delegate noted his delegation's strong support for SIDS' development efforts, as well as

the principles and objectives spelled out in the GATT, which recognise the special needs of developing countries. He added that in order for SIDS to take advantage of the benefits of globalisation, they must be integrated into the world economy. He referred to text in the document adopted by the Assembly encouraging the multilateral trading system to consider, as appropriate, the granting of special and differential treatment to SIDS and said his delegation interprets this language to be consistent with, but not expansive of US trade philosophy and also said it should not be seen as prejudging the US position on granting special and differential treatment in any bilateral, regional or multilateral negotiations, nor should it prejudice US regional initiatives that offer substantial additional market access to developing countries through such programmes as the US General System of Preferences, the Caribbean Basin Initiative, the US proposed African Growth and Opportunity Act and negotiations toward the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Guyana, on behalf of the G-77/China, said the documents adopted by the Special Session represented a sound basis for the second phase of the implementation of the Programme of Action and noted that it contains proposals that are focused, action-oriented and quantifiable. The delegate said that the undeniable question of economic vulnerability will increasingly present a challenge to the ultimate objective of sustainable development for SIDS and noted that SIDS' involvement in the international trading system is fundamental to their economic viability and to the achievement of sustainable development.

General Assembly President Guirab drew attention to the unanimous consensus on the Declaration and the document on the state of progress and implementation of the POA and indicated that without adequate financial support the way forward for SIDS was uncertain.

He concluded by saying that the Special Session sent a powerful message of the international community's solidarity with SIDS and characterised it as an occasion to ensure that the well being of SIDS was the business of all humanity. □