

Slow Progress on Combating Desertification

Background

On 26 December 1996, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) entered into force amid great optimism. However, during the past four years views on the success of the Convention have varied, with delegates bemoaning, among other things, a void in leadership, a lack of political will, and in some developed countries, general disinterest in the Convention.

The Fourth, and latest, meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP-4) to the Convention met from 11-22 December 2000 in Bonn, Germany. Approximately 1000 participants attended COP-4.

The Convention provides, in article 22, paragraph 2 (a) that the COP shall regularly review the implementation of the Convention and the functioning of its institutional arrangements. The organisation of work for the fourth session was designed to facilitate such activities, focusing attention on outstanding issues requiring resolution.

By its decision 6 at COP-3, the Conference of the Parties decided to establish an *ad hoc* working group to re-

view and analyse in depth, at the fourth session, reports submitted at its third session and those reports to be submitted at its fourth session. Thereby to draw conclusions and propose concrete recommendations on further steps in the implementation of the Convention. By that same decision, the Executive Secretary of the UNCCD was requested to make all necessary arrangements for the above-mentioned *ad hoc* working group to fulfil its mandate and to meet at the fourth session.

Following is a brief summary of the discussions during COP-4:

Opening Session

German President Johannes Rau officially opened COP-4. He noted that some developed countries were practising “eco-colonialism,” and urged them not to shirk their responsibility for short-term gains and to be sufficiently self-critical to admit their failure to combat poverty and realise development in developing countries.

In his opening address, CCD Executive Secretary Hama Arba Diallo said that COP-4 should constitute a

defining step to move the implementation of the Convention from reporting to assessment to bring about actions to address the concerns of the millions of people threatened by poverty and land degradation.

José Sarney Filho, President of COP-3 and Brazilian Minister of the Environment, urged Parties to revive the spirit of the 1992 Rio Conference, noting that it was fundamental to make progress at COP-4, at least to prepare the populations living in fragile environments to cope with more adverse conditions. He recalled the *Recife Initiative*, which proposed that COP-4 adopt a declaration of commitments, and urged the various governmental institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and multilateral agencies to participate actively in formulating the declaration and making it one of the main goals of the Conference.

He underlined four areas needing attention at COP-4: 1) Strengthening the Global Mechanism to enable more decisive support to the CCD. 2) Consideration of the best



CCD Executive Secretary Hama Arba Diallo

Courtesy: IISD

procedures for the regular review of CCD implementation. 3) Strengthening the Committee on Science and Technology to support effectively the Conference of the Parties and assist affected countries. 4) Including in its outcomes the need for special emphasis on drought and desertification in the Rio+10 process.

Parties, observers, UN agencies, and international inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations gave opening statements.

UNEP Executive Director Klaus Töpfer said that CCD is a chance for the North and South to enter into a global compact to secure our common future.

Jan Pronk, in recalling his experience as President of the recent climate change negotiations, highlighted seven important lessons in environmental negotiations, including the need to: define the issue at stake in global terms, and in terms of both environment and development; make it a political issue; use the latest scientific findings and apply the precautionary principle if science cannot give definite answers; minimise the focus on procedural issues; not to shy away from financial issues; and prepare to make decisions instead of looking for other common positions.

The affected developing countries described in their statements national efforts to combat desertification. Nigeria, speaking on behalf of the G-77/China, emphasised the need to designate the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as the financial mechanism of the CCD. Benin concurred, adding that the GEF should be opened to support combating desertification, as happened with the recently concluded Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). The G-77/China called also for the establishment of a committee to review implementation of the Convention.

In presenting its declaration resulting from a two-day meeting held from 12-13 December 2000, a representative of the Inter-Parliamentary Roundtable called for a new GEF (Global Environment Facility) window to finance CCD implementation.

The GEF itself outlined five proposals responding to the November 2000 GEF Council request for a paper for its 2001 meeting concerning the best options to strengthen GEF support for CCD implementation.

France, on behalf of the European Union, said it is possible to mobilise resources for the CCD without a financial instrument. Sweden and Pakistan welcomed the GEF Council decision and Germany said it would call for the enhancement of GEF support for CCD implementation at the GEF's next replenishment negotiations.

Regarding regional concerns, Georgia, Romania, the Czech Republic and Turkey appealed to all Parties to adopt the fifth CCD annex for Eastern and Central Europe.

Two plenary sessions devoted to dialogue with NGOs were held on 15 December and on 20 December. Despite the small number of NGOs at COP-4, compared with the 4000 at the recent climate change negotiations, the CCD Executive Secretary expressed his belief that they could be effective.

Committee of the Whole

The Committee of the Whole started its work by considering the Programme and Budget. With regard to ways to improve the budgeting and reporting processes, the discussion centred on three proposals presented by the Secretariat. These were processes that are programme-based, result-based or programme-based with an indication of the results. Although delegates acknowledged the need for transparency, there were differing views over the process.

The G-77/China and several developing countries preferred programme-based budgeting, which is also used by the sister conventions on biodiversity and climate change. The EU was for a result-based system, as used by

the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Population Fund, based on the work programmes of the Secretariat, the Global Mechanism and the Committee on Science and Technology. The speaker requested that an audit of the base budget for the 2000-2001 biennium be submitted to COP-5.

In the final plenary, the Conference adopted by acclamation the programme and budget for the biennium 2000-2001. The decision includes both the core budget and the supplementary fund and special fund. Under the core budget, the COP, *inter alia*, approves an increase by US\$ 335,300 to cover the costs of the intersessional meeting of the *ad hoc* working group (AHWG) noting that this will not constitute a precedent for the future.

Review of the CCD

The CCD Executive Secretary presented the relevant documents for consideration, including the proposed organisation of work for the AHWG established at COP-3. The document, among other things, stipulates the objectives, composition and mandate of the AHWG; describes the nature of the review process; and describes the methodology and criteria to review implementation.

Regarding this working group, Tunisia, Mauritania, Uzbekistan and Canada stated a preference for a standing committee rather than short-term, short-lived *ad hoc* committees; an open-ended working group that could hold intersessional meetings, but was not a substitute for the committee to review regularly CCD implementation.

The G-77/China, with Syria, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia and Uzbekistan, supported a five-member bureau for the AHWG. The EU preferred three members, two co-chairs and a rapporteur. Chile, speaking for GRULAC (a group of South American States), with Nigeria and Syria, urged for a regional balance.

In its final decision, the COP establishes a five-member bureau for the *ad hoc* working group; authorises a review of all national reports submitted to COP-3 and COP-4 before COP-5; states that an interim report be submitted to COP-4 by the AHWG; and convenes one intersessional meeting for a maximum of 15 working days to complete the review.

The COP adopted the draft decision on the review of implementation of the Convention, which decides that: the AHWG should fulfil its mandate and draw up conclusions and recommendations for further steps in implementation; and that further proposals by Parties based on the experience and review of the AHWG on recommendations for review and implementation be submitted through the Secretariat for consideration at COP-5.

Activities of the Secretariat to Assist Developing Countries to prepare national reports

Under this item the Secretariat noted that most countries had identified their CCD focal points. National Action Plans have been adopted in several countries; and some countries have adopted new legislation, while others are reinforcing existing policy instruments linked to poverty alleviation, enhancement of food security and agricultural development.

Recife Initiative

Delegates considered this item both in the Committee of the Whole and subsequently in several informal working groups and contact group meetings.

The draft declaration on the commitments to enhance implementation of CCD obligations (Recife Initiative) was adopted, as amended by China to include "desertification monitoring and assessment" in the section of the declaration on thematic areas.

Strengthening relationships with relevant conventions, international organisations, institutions and agencies

The Committee adopted a draft decision regarding the financing of CCD implementation by multilateral agencies and institutions, including information on GEF activities concerning desertification and recommended it to the COP for consideration. The COP adopted this decision which, among other things, takes note of the GEF Council decision at its last meeting, requesting the Chief Executive officer to explore best options for enhancing GEF support to assist affected countries to implement the CCD.

Consideration of an additional regional implementation annex to the Convention

Informal consultations were held to prepare a draft decision on an annex for Central and Eastern Europe, which was then submitted to the COP for adoption.

By October 2000, nine Central and Eastern European countries were Parties to the CCD. Armenia, with Kazakhstan and Ukraine, urged delegates to adopt the annex, as it would make it possible for countries with economies in transition to establish the legal basis necessary for CCD implementation.

Syria, speaking for the Asian region, with Tunisia and Mauritania, welcomed the draft annex and said its implementation should not affect resources for implementation in other regions.

The Conference later adopted the fifth regional annex for Central and Eastern European countries.

Global Mechanism

The Conference considered in one session, the discussion of the three sub-items related to the Global Mechanism: Report on Policies, Operational Modalities and Provision of Guidance to the Global Mechanism.

The discussion on this agenda item attracted many interventions. Although the progress since COP-3 in the Global Mechanism's efforts to find innovative methods to mobilise resources was acknowledged with general satisfaction, several countries stressed the need for a GEF window for the CCD.

The G-77/China, supported by GRULAC, emphasised the indispensability of the GM, but also noted its shortcomings, since it is not a fund, and thus, the need to access direct resources.

Delegates proposed that resources be mobilised through debt-cancellation, from foundations, NGOs and the private sector, and other multilateral approaches, in-

cluding from the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The EU urged the Global Mechanism to concentrate on bilateral and multilateral funding.

On 22 December 2000, the COP adopted a decision on the Global Mechanism (L.24), noting the reports on the operational modalities of the GM and of the Facilitation Committee of the Global Mechanism.

Annex for Conciliation and Arbitration Procedures

The COW considered a draft decision on outstanding items relating to procedures and institutional mechanisms for resolution of questions on implementation and on annexes containing arbitration and conciliation procedures.

Patrick Széll (UK), reported that the open-ended *ad hoc* group of experts on legal matters, established at COP-3, had met once and briefly considered the issues of arbitration and conciliation, resolution of questions of implementation, and Rule 47 of the Rules of Procedure. He noted that due to limited time, the group was unable to consider the issues in detail. The group prepared a draft decision on this matter for adoption by the COP.

The final decision adopted (L.17) contains two parts: one on resolution of questions of implementation and one on arbitration and conciliation procedures. It decides, *inter alia*,

“To reconvene the ad hoc group of experts at COP-5 to examine and make recommendations on

procedures for the resolution of questions on implementation and on annexes and conciliation procedures, taking into account the document prepared by the Secretariat and in light of progress of other negotiations on the same matters;”

and

“Invites the Secretariat to update the information to reflect the progress achieved in this area in other conventions, and to prepare revised documentation for consideration by COP-5”.

Summary

COP-4 achieved some of its goals. It commenced work on the *ad hoc* working group to review implementation. It decided to consider modalities for the establishment of a committee to review implementation of the Convention (CRIC), and adopted a decision relating to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and how to enhance access to that body to assist countries with CCD implementation. However, as at previous meetings of the Conference of the Parties, there were differing views as to whether COP-4 had been a success or not. In spite of the good progress made in the areas mentioned, many delegates still left with a feeling of time lost on procedural obstacles and of no real progress on substantial issues, such as the review of the Convention's implementation.

The Fifth Session of the Conference of the Parties is scheduled to meet from 17-28 September 2001 in Bonn, Germany. (MJ)

