

Reviews: Conference

Report on the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg, September 2002

Since the first UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in 1972, there have been a series of follow-up Summits, including the Earth Summit in 1992, which set the framework for the 2002 WSSD (26 August-4 September) in Johannesburg. The WSSD was tasked to review progress on the implementation of the sustainable development action plan, Agenda 21, agreed in 1992, address new challenges and agree concrete actions for delivering the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Ireland was one of 190 participating countries. The 40-person Irish delegation included both government and non-government members, reflecting the spirit of inclusiveness advocated by Agenda 21.

The two main documents adopted at the WSSD were the political declaration, known as the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and a plan of implementation. After 18 months of work

through four preparatory meetings and ten days in Johannesburg, the Declaration agreed was not based on broad-based consultation and negotiation, even at an inter-governmental level. However, the banality of the text, excluding reference to any meaningful commitments, facilitated its acceptance: governments thereby avoiding the embarrassment of five years previously, when the UN General Assembly president abandoned the exercise when it was clear no meaningful text was possible.

The Plan of Implementation was the focus of the real negotiations and was the most important inter-governmental outcome. The final draft text highlighted wide divisions of opinion ensuring contentious negotiations in Johannesburg. Globalisation and trade have become synonymous in the decade since Rio. Inevitably, the inter-relationship between the environment, sustainable development, poverty eradication and international trade was a core focal area. Those who attempted to ensure the WSSD would further sharpen the principles set out in Rio by establishing the primacy of environmental

degradation, sustainable development and poverty eradication in a new framework for international trade were thwarted by the very powerful effort, led by the JUSCANZ group, to place WTO (World Trade Organisation) rules in a superior position vis-à-vis other international agencies and treaties. These counter positions provided one of the most dramatic negotiations at the WSSD, with the phrase, "while ensuring WTO consistency" only being dropped at the last minute after Ethiopia and Norway voiced strong objections.

While the Plan of Implementation recognises the need for a more equitable, rules-based, non-discriminatory multilateral trading system as a key element in the strategy to exploit the opportunities and address the challenges which globalisation has created, by referring back to the implementation of the Doha Ministerial Conference the Summit did not progress any of the developing countries' key concerns on a range of trade related issues. The absence of progress at the WSSD on issues related to market access, tariffs, trade distorting subsidies and the commodity crisis mean a continuing decline in the competitive capacity of developing countries with all the negative consequences for

poverty and non-sustainable development this entails.

Mitigating the negative impact of the Doha round at the WSSD could have been advanced by arriving at an international consensus to build on the outcomes of the UN Finance for Development (FfD) conference in Monterrey. Commitment to meeting the target of 0.7% of GNP, involving the UN Secretary-General in the monitoring and reporting of ODA (overseas development assistance) commitments and the linking of debt sustainability to the achievement of the MDGs were reflected in the draft plan of implementation. After a decade of ODA decline, the total increases in aid promised by the EU and the US, if indeed honoured, would still only add up to a fifth of the estimated increase in current aid levels needed if the MDGs are to be reached. Given the historical lack of accountability on ODA delivery, a UN monitoring and reporting role on ODA would be welcome, but this was rejected by the developed countries on the basis that they do this themselves through the OECD. With the fragility of the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative) increasingly obvious in the post-11 September economic fallout, addressing the issue of

external debt as a means to enabling progress towards the attainment of the MDGs was a priority issue for most developing countries. The preparatory Bali text on debt had created an opportunity for the WSSD to define debt sustainability in terms of meeting the MDGs. However, the critical phrase, "to ensure debt sustainability consistent with the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration" was dropped from the final text. By failing to acknowledge that attaining the MDGs is currently off track, the requirement to set time-bound targets for ODA, to link debt sustainability to the attainment of the MDGs and address trade distorting subsidies was adroitly evaded.

The Summit was not without initiatives. The adverse impact of recent systemic fraud on financial markets made corporate accountability a priority agenda item. While a legally binding framework for corporate accountability was not agreed, the WSSD did secure a commitment to "actively promote corporate responsibility and accountability, based on the Rio Principles, including through the full development and effective implementation of

inter-governmental agreements and measures, international initiatives and public-private partnerships, and appropriate national regulations, and support continuous improvement in corporate practices in all countries". Other targets, though qualified, were set in relation to fisheries restoration and access to clean water and sanitation.

However, while the Political Declaration and Plan of Implementation, called type I outcomes, are essentially general and vague, type II outcomes, which were not negotiated in the formal WSSD preparatory process were very much to the fore. These relate to the voluntary commitments to specific targets or objectives for the implementation of sustainable development made by individual governments, non-governmental actors or by partnerships of governmental and/or non-governmental actors. Of the 200 plus partnerships, involving governments, the private sector, non-governmental and international organisations announced during the Summit, 118 are in the 5 priority areas identified by the UN Secretary-General: water and sanitation, energy, health and environment, agriculture and biodiversity and eco-system management

(WEHAB). Many NGOs have expressed concerns about the UN endorsing these initiatives without in-built accountability mechanisms. A core criticism of them is that they could become a mechanism for governments evading their international obligations, most notably in the area of public services, such as water, energy, health and education provision.

Overall, the Summit achieved remarkably little, meeting to stand still. On the one occasion Ireland had the floor in the Plenary Hall, the Taoiseach reiterated Ireland's "absolute commitment to achieving, by 2007, the UN target of spending 0.7% of GNP on ODA", yet precisely how the government expects to fulfil this promise is increasingly unclear. The Director of the Third World Network, Martin Khor, succinctly sums up WSSD when he writes: "with such small results for such a heavy expense in personnel, time and resources, it will be quite a long time before a convincing case is made for another world summit of this type".

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