

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP  
PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

PAPER 1

EVOLUTION OF THE CSD  
HOW TO MAKE IT MORE EFFECTIVE AND  
INFLUENTIAL.

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## COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

### Introduction

This background paper looks back to Rio and tries to put in perspective the developments over the past thirteen years. The paper ends with some suggestions for the meeting to reflect on.

### History

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 adopted an ambitious and comprehensive agenda of global action – Agenda 21.

As the scope and ambitions of Agenda 21 grew during the negotiations leading up to the Summit it became clear that there would need to be a robust mechanism for keeping track of progress and maintaining momentum. In Chapter 38 of Agenda 21 countries accordingly agreed that a new Commission for Sustainable Development should be set up by the United Nations to perform the progress-chasing function.

Chapter 38 set out a number of key tasks for the new Commission and some key elements for its constitution and mode of operation. These proposals were elaborated further by the General Assembly in the following months, culminating in the adoption of Resolution 47/191 in January 1993, which set out the constitution and mode of operation of the CSD. (Relevant extracts from Chapter 38 and Resolution 47 are at Annexes I and II.)

The Commission has now been in operation for 12½ years and has had 13 annual meetings in New York. It has proved an effective means for keeping the whole of the sustainable development agenda under active review, and has been the instrument for launching a number of new initiatives and securing inter-agency co-operation over the years of its existence such as:

- Adding new chapters to Agenda 21
- Acting as an annual focus for sustainable development discussion and debate
- Introducing multistakeholder dialogues
- Recommended that relevant bodies seek a legally binding status for the Prior Informed Consent procedure
- Setting up of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Forests and the UN Forum on Forests
- Supporting the Washington Global Plan for Action on protecting the marine environment from land based activities
- Setting a date for Sustainable Development Strategies to be produced and implemented
- Agreed new consumer guidelines to include sustainable development



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Its small but high-powered secretariat in the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has played a key role in developing analytical tools for monitoring progress on sustainable development, and for assessing the sustainability of other policies and programmes.

From the outset however countries have had to contend with a number of problems in advancing sustainable development through the work of the Commission. These problems include:

- lack of full political commitment
- the breadth and complexity of the sustainable development agenda
- overlap with the agendas and programmes of other bodies
- lack of executive authority and of resources
- universal v. limited membership
- the need for effective engagement with stakeholders and the difficulty of achieving this.

Many of these problems are to some extent inherent to the way in which the Commission was established and the tasks it was given. Nevertheless countries and the Commission have found ways to address some of them during the 13 years of the Commission's life, and it is timely to consider whether other improvements are possible in present circumstances.

This paper briefly discusses the problems identified above and suggests a number of issues or questions about possible developments in the work and mode of operation of the Commission that participants in the Workshop may like to explore.

### Challenges

#### **a) *Political Commitment.***

Lack of full political commitment to the goal of sustainable development and to the goal of using the United Nations to advance has always been a fundamental problem confronting the CSD. At successive Summits from Rio onwards countries and their Heads of Government have given a measure of commitment to sustainable development. But in practice they tend to put this commitment alongside many other commitments and objectives which together dilute or even run counter to the goal of sustainable development. They are often reluctant to allow the sustainable development perspective to constrain or modify other goals and objectives that seem more immediate and pressing. And while recognizing that some of these issues may eventually require international action many countries have an instinctive resistance to the diminution of national sovereignty and scope for independent decision-making that a commitment to effective



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international action may require.

As with many other United Nations activities or concerns there is no simple answer to this problem. These are real constraints and there is no magic reform to the processes of the CSD that will instantly transform the political aspirations and priorities of the countries of the world, and put the over-arching goal of sustainable development at the top of the active political agenda.

The CSD can however play an important role in keeping the requirements of sustainable development firmly on the agenda, and in identifying and promoting in a timely way the incremental steps and initiatives that can help the world towards a more sustainable future. The task for all those actively engaged with the CSD and with the advancement of sustainable development in the world is help the CSD to become a more effective instrument for progress in that direction. For example one role that the CSD already performs is to ensure that good information and analysis of trends in the world is regularly updated and published so that the extent to which the world is falling short of sustainable development can be regularly and systematically be brought before the UN and its members states.

***b) Breadth and Complexity of the Agenda.***

The sustainable development agenda as set out in Agenda 21 covers almost every aspect of national and international policy and relations. Inevitably therefore it is difficult to secure focus and decisiveness in dealing with this range of subjects in an annual overview meeting. There is insufficient time to go into individual subjects in detail. And given the range of subject matter it has sometimes proved difficult to secure the attendance and active participation of all the different Government Departments and other participants that would be needed to achieve real movement and commitment on many of the key topics. In such situations there is a dangerous tendency for countries to fall back on reiteration of previous positions and arguments and to end up with negotiating virtually the same texts on difficult issues without making significant progress or breakthroughs.

From the beginning of the CSD this problem was recognised and partially addressed by focusing attention on a different topic or group of topics each year in a five year cycle. This sharpened the focus and manageability of the CSD's activities for all participants. By the time of the second five year review at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 it was decided to take this process further and to establish a ten year forward work programme for the CSD, with a similar grouping of subjects, but now providing two years for the examination of each subject group instead of one only. It was hoped that allowing two years for each group of topics would allow them to be examined in greater depth, and that it would be possible to take on board new thinking and evidence particularly in the first review year of each cycle.



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It was intended that in this first review year new evidence and reports on the topics under review would be submitted together with examples of best practice from all parts of the world and all sectors of society. There should be no negotiations in that year so that countries and all other parties present could concentrate on assimilating the new evidence and reviewing their own thinking in an open way without needing to be constrained by past positions or the requirements of a negotiating process. Then in the second or policy year of each cycle negotiations could start from an agreed base of evidence and experience which might lead to some breakthroughs or evolution of policy thinking.

Informal feedback from the first two year cycle under these new arrangements is somewhat mixed. The first review year clearly managed to open up some new areas and to bring new forms of evidence and experience to the attention of the CSD participants. But old habits die hard, and when it came to the second policy year old ways of negotiating text, and old formulae for dealing with some of the contentious issues in the water field reasserted themselves, and it is hard to conclude that CSD 13 was able to advance policy debate and action on global water issues very substantially.

***c) Overlap with Other International Bodies.***

The agenda of the CSD overlaps with that of many other international bodies and agencies. Development issues are addressed in the IFIs, the GEF, UNDP, UNCTAD, WTO and many other fora. Environmental issues are dealt with in UNEP, and to some extent in WHO. In principle sustainable development provides an overarching conceptual framework against which development goals and progress should be assessed. The CSD ought therefore to provide a forum in which the interactions between economic, social and environmental goals can be appropriately weighed up and political messages or guidance given to other more specialised bodies as to the way in which they need to handle issues so as to secure sustainable outcomes.

The CSD secretariat has made working level linkages with all the other international bodies that interact with the sustainable development agenda and representatives of those bodies frequently participate in the CSD meetings. But the CSD as a whole has never managed to achieve an over-arching influence with other bodies commensurate with the over-arching nature of its subject matter. Other international bodies and agencies have in the main continued to advance their own agendas and priorities and to give such attention as they deemed appropriate to sustainable development without much reference to the work or suggestions of the CSD.

***d) Executive authority and resources***

The CSD has no executive authority or resources. It is serviced by a small secretariat



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that forms part of the UN Secretariat. There is probably little appetite for seeking to develop the CSD into a major executive agency with substantial resources. But it could probably do significantly more to advance sustainable development in the world with some enhancement of the resources available to it. Areas in which resources might be deployed include:

- research,
- support for pilot projects and partnerships;
- support for more active dialogues with other agencies;
- support for national and regional processes, peer group review etc.
- follow up previous cycle decisions.

### ***e) Membership.***

The formal membership of the Commission is currently limited to 53 countries, elected by UN regions. All meetings have however been open to participation by all countries, and since all decisions have been adopted by consensus the restriction of voting rights to formal members of the Commission has not caused any difficulties in practice.

### ***f) Stakeholder and Partnerships***

Stakeholders have much to contribute to the advancement of sustainable development in the world – to analysis and identification of ways forward, as commentator on government positions and emerging compromises, and as actors on small or larger scales in a variety of partnerships.

Stakeholders have played an important part in the successive international conferences and in the annual meetings and processes of the CSD. Experience indicates that there are a number of crucial factors involved in securing effective participation and engagement by stakeholders, including:

- How to engage a legitimate and well-balanced selection of effective participants.
- How to provide sufficient time both before and at meetings to enable stakeholder input to be prepared and brought to bear;
- How to encourage Governments to engage seriously and appropriately with stakeholder inputs;
- How to engage stakeholder participants in partnership projects and action as well as in policy debate; (A number of more detailed suggestions about enhancing the partnership programmes are set out in the separate Paper 3.)

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**Discussion Points**

**a) *Political Commitment.***

- What more could the CSD do to give the challenge of sustainability greater political salience in the world?
- Produce more analytical reports and persuasive material about the challenges to sustainability both globally and nationally, and disseminate it more widely?
- Draw in wider circles of participants who need to be more directly engaged in the sustainability debate, including departments of finance and economics, trade and development, agriculture, education etc, and more weighty stakeholder participants?
- Support the development of regional and national processes for sustainable development, and encourage peer group review?

**b) *Breadth and Complexity of the Agenda.***

- How could the two year process be made more productive?
- Could it be seen as a 104 weeks of activity?
- Could there be a better articulation of the review years and policy years?
- Could the review year conclude with some agreed stocktaking of the evidence about the state of the world and the effectiveness or otherwise of particular policies programmes and plans?
- Could it set out a few key challenges for all parties to address in the following policy year?
- Could the policy year start with reports back from countries, agencies and civil society on their answers to those questions and what they would like to see the international community do about them, either through CSD or other channels?
- How can we capture the regional outcomes better?
- Could a technology bank for the two year cycle be created (available free technology, technology that could be available at preferential rates)?

(Other more detailed suggestions are made in Paper 2 about ways of linking the two years of the CSD cycle).

**c) *Overlap with Other International Bodies.***

- Could there be a better articulation of the relationship between CSD and other international bodies and agencies that would embed sustainable development more securely throughout the international architecture?



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- Could the 2 year review cycle be used, inter alia, for a deeper and more extended dialogue with other agencies on key issues, eg with joint meetings or workshops on key issues?
- Could there be an institutionalised process for sending messages, queries or challenges from CSD to other international bodies for deliberation in those bodies, and then some further review of the replies or responses?
- How can the IFIs be drawn into the process better to enable resources to follow the WSSD agreements?

**d) Executive authority and resources**

- Would there be support for securing resources to enable the CSD to be more active in any of the above areas, and what would be the modalities for achieving this?

**e) Membership**

- Would the influence of the CSD in the world be enhanced by giving it universal membership - if so would the CSD need to be upgraded to a General Assembly Committee?
- Should the idea of a Trusteeship Council for Sustainable Development be revisited?

**f) Stakeholder and Partnerships**

- How can the experience of engagement with civil society developed over the past 15 years best be built upon and consolidated in the work of the CSD?

