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The UN Commission on Sustainable Development: The first five years

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In 1992 the UN Conference on Environment and Development changed the international environmental agenda. For the first time, the UN system examined both environmental protection and economic development on an equal footing at the same conference. The results of the Earth Summit, as UNCED was popularly called, embodied in the global programme of action, Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the Non-legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles for a Global Consensus on the Management, Conservation, and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forests (the ''Forest Principles''), tried to promote and operationalize this concept of sustainable development and change the way the international system looks at the relationship between the environment and economic development.

At the international level, the main responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the Rio accords and sustainable development fell to the Commission on Sustainable Development. This Commission, which was called for in Agenda 21 and established by UN Resolution 47/191 in December 1992, was given three broad responsibilities:

- to review progress at the international, regional, and national levels in the implementation of recommendations and commitments contained in the final documents of UNCED, namely Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the Forest Principles;
- to elaborate policy guidance and options for future activities to follow up UNCED and achieve sustainable development; and

- to promote dialogue and build partnerships for sustainable development with governments, the international community, and the major groups identified in Agenda 21 as key actors outside central government who have a major role to play in the transition towards sustainable development, including women, youth, indigenous peoples, NGOs, local authorities, workers' and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific community, and farmers, to ensure effective follow-up of UNCED (UN 1993a).

How well the Commission has succeeded in fulfilling its mandate and further advancing the sustainable development agenda is the subject of debate. While there are numerous ways to evaluate the success or failure of any organization, there are two major challenges in evaluating the work of the CSD. First, it is still a relatively young intergovernmental body without a significant track record. Second is the fact that the Commission is a different beast to everyone who is involved in or observes its work. Just like the three blind men who come across an elephant, each person who examines the work of the CSD has a different opinion as to what exactly we are talking about when we discuss the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

With this in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the work of the CSD during its first five years. The first part of the chapter will examine the history of the Commission and its work. The evaluation itself will examine the Commission's effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate, and its role in setting and coordinating the international sustainable development agenda. The chapter concludes with an examination of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the Commission, and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the work of the CSD, including the need to streamline its agenda, encourage accountability and peer review, break out of the North-South schism, and mobilize greater political will at all levels.

History of the CSD

The CSD is one of the major institutional outcomes of UNCED, which was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. Agenda 21 provided for the creation of the CSD in Chapter 38:

> In order to ensure the effective follow-up of the conference, as well as to enhance international cooperation and rationalize the intergovernmental decision-making capacity for the integration of environment and development issues and to examine the progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national, regional and international levels, a high-level Commission on Sustainable Development should be established in accordance with Article 68 of the Charter of the United Nations (UN 1992, 275).

Agreement in Rio about the creation of the CSD was achieved in spite of considerable opposition from many Northern governments, including the United Kingdom and the United States, who opposed on principle the creation of any new body in the UN system. This position was eventually overridden, in large part as a result of the persistence of a number of Southern and other Northern governments and a number of NGOs (Bigg and Dodds 1997). In the autumn of 1992, the Forty-seventh UN General Assembly debated the role and modalities of the CSD and, after much haggling, adopted Resolution 47/191, ''Institutional arrangements to follow up the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development,'' which established the CSD as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

The Commission consists of 53 member states elected by ECOSOC for a three-year term with seats allocated on a regional basis: 13 for African states; 11 for Asian states; 10 for Latin American and Caribbean states; six for Eastern European states; and 13 for Western European and other states. One-third of the members are elected annually and outgoing members are eligible for re-election. Other states, organizations of the UN system, and accredited intergovernmental organizations and NGOs can attend as observers.

The Commission held its first substantive session in New York from 14 to 25 June 1993. Malaysian Ambassador Ismail Razali was elected chairman and presided over an exchange of information on the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level. The CSD also adopted a Multi-Year Thematic Programme of Work for the period 1993–1997. This work programme integrated the 40 chapters of Agenda 21 into nine thematic clusters: (a) critical elements of sustainability (including trade and environment, sustainable consumption, combating poverty, demographic dynamics, and sustainability); (b) financial resources and mechanisms; (c) education, science, transfer of environmentally sound technologies, cooperation, and capacity-building; (d) decision-making structures; (e) roles of major groups; (f) health, human settlements, and fresh water; (g) land, desertification, forests, and biodiversity; (h) atmosphere, oceans, and all kinds of seas; and (i) toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes.

Clusters (a) to (e), which are broadly cross-sectoral in nature, were to be considered by the Commission annually, while clusters (f) to (i), which are sectoral in nature, were to be considered on a multi-year basis: (f) and (i) in 1994, (g) in 1995, and (h) in 1996. According to the work programme, in 1997 the Commission would conduct an overall review of the progress achieved in the implementation of Agenda 21 to prepare for the Nineteenth UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) to assess progress in implementing Agenda 21.

At its first session, the Commission also recognized the need for inter-

sessional work to address some of the more contentious issues that the CSD would discuss in 1994, namely finance and technology transfer. Delegates agreed to establish an "*ad hoc* open-ended intersessional working group" to be composed of government experts to assess and suggest specific measures to enhance the implementation of Agenda 21 in these two areas. The 1993 session of the CSD also set up reporting processes to channel information on efforts to implement Agenda 21 into the CSD for review; allowed a number of governments to offer to host meetings that addressed various parts of the CSD agenda; agreed on other matters involving financial assistance and technology transfer; and addressed progress made by various parts of the UN system towards incorporating Agenda 21 into their operations (Bigg and Dodds 1997; CSD 1993b).

The second session of the CSD was held from 16 to 27 May 1994, under the chairmanship of former German Environment Minister Dr Klaus Töpfer. Delegates widely acknowledged the need for effective intersessional work to prepare for the next session of the Commission and the CSD took the decision to extend the mandate of the intersessional working groups, so that one group would prepare for the 1995 discussion on land resource issues and the second group would focus on finance and technology transfer. There was much support for intersessional meetings hosted by governments and other organizations to address issues on the CSD's agenda. The 1994 session also adopted decisions on chemical safety; greater cooperation with governing bodies of international organizations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the WTO; the need for better financing and technology transfer to support Agenda 21 implementation; and the need to change contemporary patterns of consumption and production that are detrimental to sustainable development.

With regard to the CSD's working methodology, delegates emphasized the importance of continuous exchange of information on practical experience gained by countries, organizations, and major groups; ongoing work on the elaboration of realistic and understandable sustainable development indicators that can supplement national reporting;[1] and the need for a dialogue-oriented approach, including the use of panel discussions and other means by which information could be shared and the expertise of a wide range of actors could be sought (Bigg and Dodds 1997; CSD 1994).

At its 1995 session, which met from 11 to 28 April 1995 under the chairmanship of former Brazilian Environment Minister Henrique Calvalcanti, the Commission held more dialogue sessions and panel discussions. Fifty-three countries produced national reports and more than 50 ministers and high-level officials attended the session. One of the most notable accomplishments was the establishment of the Intergovernmental

Panel on Forests to formulate options for action to support the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests and report back to the CSD in 1997. The Commission also established a work programme on consumption and production patterns; called for a review of the mechanisms for transferring environmentally sound technologies; agreed on a timetable for the formulation of sustainable development indicators; promoted an integrated approach to the planning and management of land resources; recognized the need to analyse the potential effects of environmentally related trade issues; recognized that poverty eradication is an indispensable requirement of sustainable development; and encouraged initiatives at the national and international levels, including action to phase out the use of leaded gasoline (Bigg and Dodds 1997; CSD 1995).

The fourth session of the CSD, chaired by Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Economic Development Rumen Gechev, met from 18 April to 3 May 1996, completed its multi-year review of Agenda 21, and began to assess its own current and future role. As in 1995, there was a day dedicated to the work of major groups and more panel discussions. The CSD endorsed the Global Plan of Action on protecting the marine environment from land-based activities, which was adopted in November 1995. The Commission also urged governments to pilot the 126 indicators developed by the CSD Secretariat in conjunction with governments, UN agencies, and major groups. The CSD also addressed the relationship between the WTO provisions and trade measures for environmental purposes, including those relevant to multilateral environmental agreements (Bigg and Dodds 1997; CSD 1996).

The fifth session of the CSD, which met from 7 to 25 April 1997 under the leadership of Mostafa Tolba (Egypt), prepared a comprehensive document to be adopted by UNGASS in June 1997. Governments agreed that although some progress had been made in terms of institutional development, international consensus-building, public participation, and private sector actions, the global environment continues to deteriorate and the commitments in the UNCED agreements have not been fully implemented.

Five years after the Earth Summit in Rio, delegates reconvened in New York from 23 to 27 June 1997 for UNGASS to review the implementation of Agenda 21. This meeting served as a review and assessment of the work of the Commission, and how the UN system, governments, local authorities, NGOs, and international organizations were implementing key components of Agenda 21 and moving toward sustainable development. UNGASS delegates adopted a ''Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21'' and called on the CSD to:

- make concerted efforts to attract greater involvement in its work by ministers and high-level national policy-makers responsible for specific economic and social sectors;
- continue to provide a forum for the exchange of national experiences and best practices in the area of sustainable development;
- provide a forum for the exchange of experiences on regional and subregional initiatives, and regional collaboration for sustainable development;
- establish closer interaction with international financial, development, and trade institutions.
- strengthen its interaction with representatives of major groups; and
- organize the implementation of its next multi-year programme of work in the most effective and productive way (Carpenter et al. 1997b, 10).

Delegates also agreed on a new five-year work plan, culminating with the next comprehensive review of progress achieved in the implementation of Agenda 21 in the year 2002.

Has the CSD accomplished its mission?

Unlike many functional commissions of ECOSOC, the CSD was given a very broad mandate and programme of work. Therefore, there is quite a lot of room for interpretation and evaluation of what the CSD has accomplished after its first five years. This section examines the Commission's effectiveness in accomplishing the three major goals of its mission, as set out by General Assembly Resolution 47/191.[2]

Review progress in the implementation of Agenda 21

On a purely technical level, the CSD's first multi-year programme of work reviewed the implementation of each chapter of Agenda 21, the Forest Principles, and, to a lesser extent, the Rio Declaration. Within this context, the CSD attempted to monitor implementation at the national, regional, and international levels. At the national level, the CSD assessed progress through the submission of national reports and the exchange of national experiences. From the beginning, governments had a number of concerns about national reporting. Many developing-country delegations stressed that this information should be voluntary, and that the Secretariat should not set guidelines or a standardized format for the reports. Members of the Group of 77 did not want anyone to examine the individual reports or make comparisons between them (Chasek, Goree, and Jordan 1993a). This was largely because developing countries did not

want to create a situation where development aid would be linked to national reporting. Others, such as Australia and the Nordic countries, believed that the reports should be limited to the topics being discussed during a particular year and should be as concise as possible (Chasek, Goree, and Jordan 1993b).

While the final resolution adopted by the CSD (CSD 1993a) listed guidelines that the Secretariat should follow on preparing the information to be included in the analysis of national information, it is left to individual governments to decide on the degree of detail and regularity of their reporting to the CSD, thus maintaining the voluntary nature of national reporting (Bergesen and Botnen 1996). However, the reporting requirements proved to be too vague to facilitate a comprehensive reporting process. The Secretariat continued to work closely with governments to evaluate and improve the reporting process (Verheij and Pace 1997). However, although more countries have submitted reports each year, their contents are still difficult to compare and even harder to verify. Furthermore, the questions in the reports do not always address the issues that are most important, and it is not always clear what exactly the Secretariat wants to measure. The national reports submitted have been few in number, of uneven quality, and not always linked to the political debates among ministers within the Commission. The summaries produced by the Secretariat are based on insufficient coverage and presented in such general terms that it is impossible to draw meaningful conclusions from them. As a result, they appear to play a marginal role when the Commission meets (Bergesen and Botnen 1996).

On the positive side, the CSD has actually been able to move towards a crude form of peer group review by instituting the practice of having governments give presentations and allowing other governments and major groups to comment. Furthermore, the CSD has managed to gain greater acceptance for the use of indicators to monitor progress towards sustainable development. As part of the implementation of the Work Programme on Indicators of Sustainable Development adopted by the CSD at its third session in April 1995, a working list of 134 indicators and related methodology sheets has been developed and is now ready for voluntary testing at the national level. The aim of the CSD is to have an agreed set of indicators available for all countries to use by the year 2000.

With regard to reporting on progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the international level, the majority of UN agencies, organs, and programmes have incorporated relevant recommendations from Agenda 21 into their work programmes. Information on these activities has been provided to the CSD both in the form of special reports prepared by a specific agency and through the reports prepared by the task-manager system instituted by the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Devel-

opment (IACSD). A different UN agency or department is responsible for preparing, in collaboration with concerned organizations, coordinated inputs for the consolidated analytical reports of the Secretary-General, which will focus on common UN system strategies for the implementation of Agenda 21 and identify areas for further action for consideration by the CSD (UN 1993b).

Elaborate policy guidance and options for future activities

The CSD's record in elaborating policy guidance and options for future activities to follow up UNCED and achieve sustainable development is a mixed one. On the one hand, when one looks at the cumbersome and politicized mechanics of accomplishing anything within the UN system, it is hard to imagine how a body such as the CSD can come up with any real policy guidance at all. The CSD's hands are particularly tied on issues such as finance and technology transfer, where the North-South divide is as wide as ever.

Yet there are some areas where the CSD has been successful in providing policy guidance. The first is forests. The establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) in 1995 is seen by many as a watershed event that has helped to focus the international dialogue on forests. Eleven intergovernmental processes supported the work of the IPF and over 200 comprehensive technical reports were prepared in conjunction with its work. The IPF's deliberations built international consensus and formulated approaches for action on the majority of issues under consideration.[3]

Another success story is the Comprehensive Freshwater Assessment. At its second session in 1994, the CSD requested preparation of a Comprehensive Assessment of the Freshwater Resources of the World, to be submitted at its fifth session in 1997. This assessment provides an overview of major water quantity and quality problems, with the aim of helping people understand the urgent need to deal with these issues before they become even more serious. In spite of its limitations, the available information provides the basis for a broad understanding of the problems facing various regions of the world, and of the nature and magnitude of the global implications of not dealing with these problems.[4] Furthermore, the assessment led the Commission to make fresh water one of its priority issues in the second five-year work programme.

While governments have identified new things that they want to do, the bigger question remains: ''Is anyone listening?'' Is the CSD having an impact outside of the UN basement? A number of NGOs believe that the CSD needs a more strategic process, including greater involvement of experts, national-level officials from the capitals, and stakeholders at the

local level. While the CSD has succeeded in attracting far more NGOs, ministers, and representatives from national capitals than any other ECOSOC commission, the vast majority of delegates – especially those from developing countries – are diplomats. The job of the diplomat is to negotiate, not always to understand the technical issues under negotiation. The diplomats often do not consult their capitals or the people who actually understand various environmental and development problems. Thus, the CSD debates are often characterized by North-South rhetoric. According to members of the NGO community, if the CSD is to be truly effective in the area of providing policy guidance, there should be additional funding to support the attendance of people from capitals so as to move towards substance and away from rhetoric.

Promote dialogue and build partnerships for sustainable development

Of all three areas, the CSD seems to have best accomplished its goal of promoting dialogue and building partnerships for sustainable development between governments, the international community, and major groups.[5] One of the major accomplishments of the Rio process was the breakthrough in the participation of NGOs and other major groups. Their participation gives a real vitality to the work of the CSD, particularly through the convening of side events and dialogue sessions. Some have gone so far as to say that the CSD is the most successful commission in the UN system because of the fact that it promotes dialogue between governments, intergovernmental organizations, and major groups.

During CSD-5, for the first time, there were formal dialogue sessions between governments and each of the major groups. While not everyone was satisfied with these sessions, specifically with the fact that few government delegates participated and the way in which the results of the sessions were used by the Commission, they represented a significant step in institutionalizing major groups into the work of the Commission. The general purpose of these dialogue sessions is to bring a sense of reality into the CSD. Governments are not the only ones implementing Agenda 21 and working to achieve sustainable development. Each of the major groups is also a stakeholder, and has success stories to report and problems to bring to the table.

This partnership-building within the CSD has also had an effect on the domestic agenda in some states. The CSD is one of the few UN bodies capable of generating an NGO reaction or a backlash in national capitals. While not every country has NGO representatives present during the work of the CSD, those that do must watch their backs. If the NGOs do not like what their government representatives are saying, they will re-

port on this to their constituencies at home, who will in turn put pressure on the government to explain or even change its position. In many UN bodies, governments have no one watching them and can say whatever they want, but not in the CSD. In the Commission there must be a delicate equilibrium between national interests, international role-play, and the domestic agenda. The NGOs have made sure of this.

Yet there are still some problems. First, not every major group is equally represented in the work of the Commission. While the dialogue with NGOs, women, and youth has improved – and with it an improvement in these groups' understanding of the process – the dialogue with some of the other groups has never really taken off. In the cases of other major groups, particularly business, indigenous peoples, farmers, and trade unions, the CSD is attracting members of umbrella organizations but not members of the actual groups. In other words, the ''diplomats'' for the sector are attending, rather than the rank-and-file membership. Finally, very few major groups from developing countries are represented at the CSD. Many of them cannot afford to attend or are unaware of the importance of the CSD. As a result, a certain amount of outreach to major groups is still necessary.

Second, in spite of the increased attendance of major groups at the CSD and the convening of dialogue sessions and other events, there is still concern that governments are not listening. While some major group representatives, especially members of the Women's Caucus, have become very effective at lobbying government delegates and ensuring that their views are represented in the decisions, many other major groups feel that although they contribute to sustainable development, they have little impact on the work of the CSD.

Finally, there are some government delegates who are concerned that major groups are no longer able to distinguish between their role as lobbyists and their lack of a role as decision-makers. No matter how much access is given to major groups at the CSD, they are still observers. The decisions rest with governments, who hopefully have the basis for making those decisions. Many major groups come to the CSD with inflated expectations. Instead of observing what is going on, reporting to their own constituencies, and trying to influence policy-makers at home, some major group representatives behave like UN diplomats and spend their time trying to influence the text under negotiation. Some government delegates argue that they must remember that a lot of advocacy work needs to be done at home. NGOs and major group representatives respond that advocacy work also has to be done at the CSD and, to have the greatest impact, they must participate in the drafting of text to the greatest extent possible. These issues regarding the appropriate role for major groups are now resonating throughout the entire UN system.

Critical assessment of the CSD

While the major focus of the CSD during its first five years was to monitor the implementation of the Rio agreements, its purpose is not only to look back to what has been accomplished since 1992. The CSD also has a role to play in setting the international sustainable development agenda and acting as a coordinating body within the UN system on environment and development issues. The Commission has had varying levels of success in these areas, but since the CSD is an intergovernmental body, the onus of responsibility ultimately rests in the hands of the member governments. In fact, unless its member governments are ready to act on a particular issue, the CSD will accomplish little. During its first five years the CSD did find that the time was ripe for governments to act in several areas and, as a result, the Commission can report some success. Yet, in far more cases, the CSD has not yet proven to be a major force outside the UN system.

Agenda-setting

Given its position as a highly visible and well-attended UN commission, the CSD has an opportunity to play a pivotal role in setting the international sustainable development agenda. But how does one measure the CSD's effect on agenda-setting? Has the CSD generated greater concern for an issue already on the international agenda? Has the CSD put any new issues on the international agenda? Has the CSD directed attention to the links between issues that were formerly considered separately? Has the CSD promoted more sophisticated priority-setting among the many issues on the international agenda?

To a certain extent, some CSD delegates and observers believe that the Commission has been successful in generating greater concern for issues on the international sustainable development agenda. By creating the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, the CSD was able to focus the forest issue and create more understanding that forests are owned by someone and give a livelihood to many people. Fresh water resources and energy are two issues that did not receive much attention in Rio and are now at the top of the international agenda (at least the CSD's agenda for the period 1998–2001), largely due to the work of the Commission. Similarly, the CSD's discussions on sustainable production and consumption patterns and the need for technology transfer, education, and capacity-building in developing countries have raised the profiles of these issues. However, when it comes to putting new issues on the international agenda, the CSD has not been as successful. Some argue that the CSD

has put the issues of transport and tourism on the agenda, and has advanced the discussions on finance so that new issues such as private direct investment, airline fuel taxes, and a tax on foreign financial transactions have been added to the international sustainable development agenda. Others argue that UNEP has contributed and will continue to contribute much more to agenda-setting due to its scientific and technical capabilities. But given the wide range of sustainable-development-related issues that could be placed on the agenda, these issues are only the tip of the iceberg.

Perhaps the area where the CSD, which is a political rather than a technical body, can have the greatest impact in agenda-setting is in directing attention to links between issues and promoting more sophisticated priority-setting. In fact, many had hoped that this would be the primary role of the CSD. Yet the Commission has had only a modicum of success in these two areas. The CSD's first multi-year thematic programme of work was designed to try to draw out the links between related sectoral issues and address cross-sectoral issues in terms of the sectors under review. For example, during its 1995 session the CSD examined all the sectoral issues related to land resources (agriculture, forests, desertification, biodiversity, and mountains), and it was hoped that the cross-sectoral discussions on issues such as finance, technology transfer, consumption and production patterns, education, and capacity-building would be discussed in terms of land resources as well. While the Commission's intentions were admirable, its execution was not so successful. Governments continued to differentiate their statements and their negotiating strategies on both the cross-sectoral and sectoral issues. The debate on finance was rarely able to get beyond the call for new and additional financial resources and the achievement of the UN target of 0.7 per cent of GNP for official development assistance, much less focus on finance for a particular sector. This was due, in part, to the composition of government delegations and the lack of issue linkage at the national level.

The one area where there was some success in issue linkage was in some of the government-sponsored intersessional meetings. In many of these meetings, which provide expert input into the work of the CSD, participants have drawn out these linkages in finance, fresh water resources, forests, sustainable production and consumption, and other issues. However, while the results of these meetings are submitted to the CSD and become part of the official record, the level and quality of debate in the Commission rarely does justice to the work of these expert meetings. So, although linkages are being advanced outside the CSD, the intergovernmental political process has not yet been able to surmount the rhetoric to make the necessary progress in this aspect of agenda-setting.

During its first five years, the CSD can be described as having a marked lack of priorities, not to mention a lack of effectiveness in priority-setting. This was in large part due to the nature of the multi-year programme of work that stressed the overall review of the implementation of Agenda 21 over priority-setting. However, the Special Session of the General Assembly adopted a new multi-year programme of work for the CSD for the period 1998–2002 that does reflect both prioritization and a streamlining of its ambitious agenda. Each year the overriding issues will be poverty and consumption and production patterns. In 1998 the sectoral theme was ''Strategic Approaches to Freshwater Management'' and the cross-sectoral theme was to be transfer of technology, capacity-building, education, science, and awareness-raising. In 1999 the sectoral theme is oceans and seas and the cross-sectoral theme is consumption and production patterns. In 2000 the sectoral theme will be integrated planning and management of land resources and the cross-sectoral theme will be financial resources, trade, and investment and economic growth. The sectoral theme in 2001 will be atmosphere, energy, and transport and the cross-sectoral theme will be information for decision-making and participation and international cooperation for an enabling environment. The 2002 session is to complete a comprehensive review (UN 1997). For each sectoral and cross-sectoral theme different chapters of Agenda 21 have been identified as the main issues for an integrated discussion under the theme. The main question that remains is whether governments will be able to address these issues in a cross-sectoral, cross-ministry nature and focus on the stated priority issues. It is important to reiterate that the CSD is an intergovernmental body, and unless the individual governments have the political will to move the dialogue forward, the CSD will not be in any position to prioritize issues or set the international sustainable development agenda.

Overall, the CSD does not have a particularly strong record in agenda-setting. Examples of the areas where the Commission has played an agenda-setting role include the global fresh water assessment and the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests. The CSD has also identified areas where major gaps existed in the international discussion of sustainable development, including such sectors as energy, transport, and tourism. Nevertheless, the CSD's record in agenda-setting must also be viewed within the context of the Commission's overall purpose. Not everyone thinks that the CSD's role is to set the international agenda, and many agree that this is more of a job for UNEP. Perhaps the CSD is better placed to play more of an advocacy role – to put political pressure on national governments and the international system to respond to the challenges of sustainable development – rather than to set the agenda.

Role of the CSD as a coordinating body within the UN system

It was envisaged that implementation of Agenda 21 would require the active involvement of all relevant international institutions, both within and outside the UN system, that deal with specific economic, social, or environmental dimensions of sustainable development. However, the CSD was never seen as *the* body that would coordinate the work of the UN system. Instead, paragraph 38.13(a) of Agenda 21 gave the CSD a monitoring role, stating that the CSD should:

> monitor progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and activities related to the integration of environmental and developmental goals throughout the United Nations system through analysis and evaluation of reports from all relevant organs, organizations, programmes and institutions of the United Nations system dealing with various issues of environment and development, including those related to finance (UN 1992).

Similarly, paragraph 21 of UN General Assembly Resolution 47/191, which established the CSD:

> requests all specialized agencies and related organizations of the United Nations system to strengthen and adjust their activities, programmes and medium-term plans, as appropriate, in line with Agenda 21, in particular regarding projects for promoting sustainable development, in accordance with paragraph 38.28 of Agenda 21, and make their reports on steps they have taken to give effect to this recommendation available to the Commission and the Economic and Social Council in 1993 or, at the latest, in 1994 (UN 1992).

This language leaves the onus of responsibility for implementing Agenda 21 with the relevant agencies themselves, although it does give the CSD the opportunity to review such actions. However, the real work at the inter-secretariat level has been led and coordinated through the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD).

The IACSD was established in October 1993 by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) – the highest inter-agency body of the United Nations, chaired by the Secretary-General, and consisting of the heads of organizations in the UN system. The IACSD meets twice a year and reports to the ACC.[6] The role of the IACSD is to identify major policy issues relating to UNCED follow-up by the UN system, and to advise the ACC on ways and means of addressing them so as to ensure effective system-wide cooperation and coordination in the implementation of Agenda 21 and other UNCED outcomes, including the CSD, and their follow-up. To accomplish this, task managers have been appointed

from the organizations of the UN system. They are responsible for inter-agency coordination, catalysing joint initiatives, identifying common strategies, preparing reports for the CSD, and exchanging information under the CSD's work programme (UN 1993c).

The UN Division for Sustainable Development provides secretariat services for both the CSD and the IACSD. As a result, the work of these two bodies – one intergovernmental and political and one inter-agency and functional – has been closely coordinated. Thus, the CSD is linked "both vertically and horizontally" to other parts of the UN system (Bigg and Dodds 1997, 21). Vertically, the Division for Sustainable Development reports to the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs,[7] who in turn assists the Secretary-General. Horizontally, it relates to UN agencies, programmes, and bodies, and takes part in the work of the IACSD.

While the primary responsibility for UN system coordination has rested with the IACSD, the CSD has had an impact on that inter-agency body and on the roles of the agencies in implementing Agenda 21. When it adopted its first multi-year thematic programme of work, the CSD created nine thematic clusters. The CSD originally introduced these thematic clusters to facilitate its own review of Agenda 21 implementation. However, these same clusters have been used to assess the capacity of UN agencies to contribute to Agenda 21 programming, and have been used by coordinating authorities to evaluate agency programming. Furthermore, the reports of the task managers have been presented and reviewed on the basis of these clusters in the CSD's multi-year thematic review process. Thus it could be said that the CSD has had an effect on coordination, since its multi-year thematic review procedure has permeated every aspect of the UN inter-agency coordination process (Henry 1996).

Strengths and weaknesses

Like any organization, the CSD has its own strengths and weaknesses that will have an impact on its future. The CSD has a number of strengths that have contributed to making it the unique body it is. To some degree, one can say that the strengths of the CSD are the same as the strengths of the United Nations as a whole: it is a forum that brings together all the countries of the world on an equal standing. However, the CSD's main strengths are in the ways it stands out from the rest of the UN system. Unlike the UN General Assembly and other bodies, there are fewer rigid formats and there is a truly open attitude about the participation of NGOs and major groups.

The CSD has also proven to be a real catalyst for policy action in numerous areas. Among other things, the CSD has motivated numerous government-sponsored meetings and workshops related to the implementation of Agenda 21; fostered coordination on sustainable development within the UN system; helped to defuse much of the resistance to national reporting that was evident in Rio; and galvanized NGO and major group activities and action aimed at sustainable development at the international, national, and local levels (Bernstein et al. 1995). Unlike many UN bodies, the CSD has attracted a mixture of ministers and fairly high-level NGOs on an annual basis. In addition, through its innovative working methods the CSD has managed to add vitality to the international sustainable development debate and keep the ''spirit of Rio'' and Agenda 21 alive. Many also credit the strong and committed Secretariat, which has been primarily responsibly for the preparation of comprehensive documentation, the development of sustainable development indicators, compilation of national reporting information, and integration of the work and contributions of major groups into the CSD process, with the success of the Commission. The commitment of the member governments, the Secretariat, the major groups, and the rest of the UN system has enabled the CSD to create a political forum with political leadership, as well as a space for new ideas, new thinking, and new forms of interaction between stakeholders and governments and between the local and global levels.

Nevertheless, like any organization, the CSD also has its weaknesses. A number of observers have commented that many of the decisions or resolutions adopted by the CSD are vague and not particularly action-oriented. Unfortunately, this is something that plagues much of the UN system. To build consensus in any multilateral negotiation process where there are so many disparate concerns to be met, sacrifices have to be made in order to reach an agreement. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to strengthening the CSD's decisions is the North-South schism over environment and development issues. Like many UN commissions or programmes that deal with economic development issues, the polarized positions of the 130 developing countries who negotiate as a bloc within the ''Group of 77'' and the developed countries have had a major impact on the work of the CSD. The Group of 77 continues to hold the entire sustainable development agenda hostage to fulfilment of developed country commitments to increase official development assistance and to provide, in general, ''new and additional financial resources.'' As a result, much of the work of the CSD results in these ''lowest common denominator'' agreements.

The fact that the CSD is a subsidiary body of ECOSOC has given it an inherent weakness. The CSD's decisions have to be endorsed by ECO-

SOC and then forwarded on to the General Assembly. This serves to weaken the impact that the CSD can have on the international community and national governments. Furthermore, as a functional commission of ECOSOC the CSD does not have its own implementing process, nor any mechanisms to hold governments accountable.

While the CSD attracts many ministers each year, most are ministers of the environment. To be truly effective in setting the sustainable development agenda, the CSD must also attract and involve ministers of foreign affairs, finance, trade, agriculture, development or development assistance, forests, and so on. Similarly, the CSD does not garner the attention of the Bretton Woods institutions or the WTO to the level at which they should be involved. Finally, the CSD has given insufficient attention to the key linkages between environment and development issues. This is due in part to the fact that governments themselves are divided along sectoral lines, and that it is very difficult for the CSD to address an integrated agenda truly when the member governments are unable to do so.

Finally, there is the issue of the CSD's relationship to UNEP. Since its creation, there has been concern about the overlapping and duplicative functions of the CSD and UNEP. The fact that the two organizations have different mandates and different structures must not be forgotten. UNEP plays a more catalytic and scientific role than the CSD by identifying critical issues for international attention and mandating negotiations or discussions that can lead to treaties.[8] The CSD plays more of a coordinating role that is enhanced by the location of the Secretariat and the meetings at UN headquarters in New York, and the close cooperation with the IACSD and major groups. In fact, some have gone so far as to say that the CSD could eventually eclipse ECOSOC as the main coordinating and political body on economic, social, environmental, and development affairs. UNEP and the CSD should be able to co-exist if they focus on their inherent comparative advantages and strengths rather than compete with one another.

Final thoughts and recommendations for the future

So where does the CSD go from here? If any informal consensus exists on the future of the CSD, it is that the CSD definitely has a future. There is no question that the CSD has established itself as an essential part of the process for reviewing implementation of Agenda 21 and advancing the sustainable development agenda. Yet there are a number of ways in which the CSD can increase its effectiveness.

Streamline the agenda

Now that the first multi-year programme of work has come to a close, the CSD has taken the opportunity to streamline its agenda for the next five years. Rather than embarking on another comprehensive review of Agenda 21, the CSD will instead focus on a selected number of issues. In essence the CSD will try to fill in the gaps in the UN system where no single agency currently has responsibility, such as fresh water resources, oceans, energy, transportation, tourism, and sustainable production and consumption. Furthermore, the CSD will try to avoid duplicating any work that is currently under way in other forums, specifically the conferences of the parties to the major environmental conventions. Hopefully, this increased focus will in turn foster greater dialogue and more action-oriented proposals than the CSD has been able to generate thus far.

Encourage greater accountability and peer review

To increase the effectiveness of the CSD in both monitoring the implementation of Agenda 21 and advancing the international sustainable development agenda, governments must feel more accountable for their actions and this can be accomplished through a certain level of peer review. National reporting must be enhanced and countries should play a role in reviewing these reports. Developing countries should examine developing countries so as to avoid any North-South finger-pointing. Similarly, the CSD must continue to foster increased dialogue within countries (between ministries and between governments and major groups), between countries, between governments and the UN system, and among UN agencies and programmes.

Break out of the North-South schism

Ambassador Ismail Razali, President of the Fifty-first General Assembly, told UNEP's High-Level Segment in February 1997, ''Agenda 21 and the CSD will only bring about sustainable, equitable, and ecologically sound development if we can break out of the North-South schism … the real political challenge is to reshape North-South relations'' (Razali 1997). The negotiations on finance during the CSD suggest that states are not only failing to break out of the North-South schism, but that the schism is increasingly polluting the UN's response to sustainable development with suspicion. For developing countries, the decline in overseas development assistance since 1992, and attempts during CSD-5 to switch the burden of international funding for sustainable development to private sector in-

vestment, which developed countries argue is a case of acknowledging actuality, have helped to discredit the very concept of "sustainable development" (Carpenter et al. 1997a). If both developed and developing countries can move beyond these issues, the CSD will become more effective at promoting policy dialogue. Until this happens, the North-South agenda will continue to dominate the sustainable development agenda.

Mobilize political will

If the CSD is to be truly successful, it must – in the words of former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali – mobilize the "political will, intellectual leadership, and partnerships" necessary to transform sustainable development into policies and practices on the ground (Boutros-Ghali 1993). In other words, the CSD needs to oblige governments to take the necessary action at the international level, but perhaps more importantly at the national and local levels. Thus far, the CSD has made some progress in mobilizing the international community, governments, and major groups to advance the sustainable development agenda, but much more needs to be done. While dialogue is and should be the focus at the international level, action – and the political will needed to promote and support it – must take place at the national and local levels.

During its first five years, the CSD has managed to generate over 400 pages of negotiated text. But these are only words, and words they will remain until the CSD manages to translate them into action. Now, in the aftermath of the Special Session of the General Assembly that received its own mixed reviews, and at the beginning of a new five-year work programme, the CSD will need to increase its effectiveness and continue to develop new and innovative working methods to maintain its position at the centre of the sustainable development debate. As the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* commented in its summary of CSD-5, the CSD must "deliver a renewed political mandate to translate popular concern into urgent and concrete instructions to politicians, translate the information-rich assessments into unequivocal action plans, and translate illusions of top-down sovereign authority and competence into partnerships that span a globalizing world" (Carpenter 1997a: 13).

Notes

1. This was considered to be a major accomplishment, since two years earlier in Rio many developing countries were not willing even to discuss the creation of sustainable development indicators for fear that their use would compromise national sovereignty over natural resources and the environment.

2. This evaluation of the first five years of the CSD is based on a review of the existing literature on the Commission as well as a series of interviews with UN, governmental, and non-governmental representatives who have participated in the work of the Commission since its establishment in 1992. The majority of the people interviewed asked that their comments be treated as "off the record." As a result, no one will be cited directly, but the author would like to thank the following people and institutions for their contributions: Oscar Avalle, GEF Secretariat, Gunilla Bjorkland, Stockholm Environment Institute, Felix Dodds, UNED-UK, Alison Drayton, Government of Guyana, Paul Hofseth, Government of Norway, Ambassador Bo Kjellén, Government of Sweden, Peter Padbury (Canada), Andrey Vasilyev, UN Division for Sustainable Development, and Marilyn Yakowitz, OECD.
3. For more information on the work of the IPF, see United Nations. "The Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests on its Fourth Session" (E/CN.17/1997/12), 20 March 1997 ⟨gopher://gopher.un.org:70/00/esc/cn17/ipf/session4/97---12.EN⟩ (visited 15 January 1998).
4. The Comprehensive Freshwater Assessment (document E/CN.17/1997/9) can be found on the Internet at ⟨gopher://gopher.un.org:70/00/esc/cn17/1997/off/97--9.EN⟩ (visited 15 January 1998).
5. Major groups, as defined by Agenda 21, include women, youth, indigenous peoples, NGOs, local authorities, workers' and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific community, and farmers.
6. Participants in the work of the IACSD include the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, the UN Department for Development Support and Management Services, the UN Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, the UN Office of Legal Affairs, the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN Centre for Human Settlements, the Regional Economic Commissions, UNCTAD, UNEP, UNICEF, the UNDP, the UNFPA, the UN International Drug Control Programme, the UNHCR, the ILO, the FAO, UNESCO, the WHO, the World Bank, the IMF, the WMO, WIPO, UNIDO, the IAEA, and secretariats of the major environmental conventions.
7. Until mid-1997, the Division for Sustainable Development was a part of the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. With the first phase of UN reform activities during the summer of 1997, the department's name was changed to the Department for Economic and Social Affairs.
8. See Downie and Levy's chapter on UNEP in this volume.

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