



Special Report on Selected Side Events at the Fourteenth Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-14)

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A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE SIDE EVENTS AT CSD-14

Consistent with other international environment and development regimes such as the UN climate change and biodiversity processes, the Commission on Sustainable Development has witnessed a rapid rise in the quantity and quality of events held in conjunction with its annual meetings. Indeed, many participants now appear to believe that such side events have become as important as the “main feature” of CSD’s official schedule. Following the four themes contained within CSD’s 2006/7 thematic cluster, the more than 65 side events mostly centered around the interrelated issues of energy, industrial development, air pollution, and climate.

ENERGY ISSUES

Just as with the “official” CSD discussions, there is no doubt that energy was the primary focus of the side events. Most events address one or more aspects of this issue, with a large number focused on access to energy for the developing world. At these events, a common theme among some speakers was that, although it is not mentioned explicitly within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), energy access is critical to achieving most development goals. The value that the side event component of CSD-14 added here was a pragmatic sense of what is required to “energize” vast areas, and the development benefits that this carries with it.

In the lively discussions that often followed panel presentations on the subject, the debate over whether to focus on the introduction of renewable technologies such as solar power inevitably emerged. The bulk of presenters maintained that the short term focus should be on providing access to energy, and that this may very well require fossil fuels, such as liquid petroleum gas. However, many donors have expressed their preference for funding climate-friendly technologies, pointing out that innovations such as solar and improved biomass stoves are less dependent on ongoing external fuel inputs, and hence less subject to the volatility of fuel prices. Several participants from both developing and developed countries objected strongly to this stance, saying that the plight of the poor merits immediate assistance, and that having this hinge on the adoption of climate-friendly technology is immoral. Related to this debate was the definition of what “renewable” actually means, and particularly whether large-scale hydropower projects that involve widespread flooding and displacement should be included within this category.

HEALTH AND GENDER EQUITY

Several events tied the issue of cooking stoves to the health issues associated with the burning of biomass and improper ventilation. Further, the issue of gender equity figured prominently within this debate, with research showing the disproportionate burden borne by women and children in the time-consuming collection of fuel, an activity so time-consuming it can present a significant barrier to formal education. Many participants and panelists were also vocal about the need to go beyond “tokenism” with this issue, and to move to a rights-based approach regarding women and energy policy.

Energy efficiency also figured prominently within the events, mostly with regards to seizing the “low-hanging fruit” by replacing obsolete appliances and reforming the transport sector, with the greatest gains to be had in the developed world. This was part of a larger discussion of sustainable production and consumption, and the need to decouple economic prosperity from energy consumption.

THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The role of the private sector figured prominently at several events, with discussions revolving around the need for conducive regulatory and investment frameworks to attract business and stimulate entrepreneurship, the utility of public-private partnerships, and how the concept of “corporate social responsibility” can be taken beyond a public relations exercise to produce verifiable performance improvements.

Just as significant, however, were the issues absent from the CSD official agenda that were addressed in several side events. It is probably no coincidence that some of these events were among the most well-attended of the entire two weeks.

THE NUCLEAR DEBATE

One such topic was that of nuclear energy. Given that 2006 marks the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, it is not surprising that two out of the three related side events cautioned against nuclear power being deemed a safe or viable option to include in the future energy mix, and urged a focus on renewables and energy efficiency as sustainable solutions. However, some pro-nuclear advocates continue to argue that the door should remain open to all energy options in the face of rising greenhouse gas emissions and the need to address climate change.

UN REFORM

Another issue that received greater attention within the side events than within the main discussions was the contentious issue of UN reform and environment and development, revolving around the General Assembly’s informal consultations, as well as the High Level Panel for System-Wide Coherence. The bulk of discussions here were focused on how to avoid pitting environment against development, how to close the widening gap between commitments made and implementation, how to further engage civil society and major groups, and the need to revitalize long-term substantial funding.

Finally, a number of participants remarked that the high quality of the research projects presented at many CSD-14 side events is not currently reflected in the shelf-life or attention they are given by decision makers. Some felt that this could be due in part to the sheer volume of literature and other materials that is generated and distributed, and the number of events held simultaneously during the course of the meeting. Whether this is true or not, it seems clear that the growing interest shown in CSD’s side events may finally be generating recognition for the informal dialogue and knowledge sharing that many seem to feel is an unsung cornerstone of multilateral environment agreements.