



**THE NORTH/SOUTH CONFERENCE FOR
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
WEDNESDAY, 27 MAY 1998**

On Wednesday, 27 May, participants at the North/South Conference for Sustainable Development focused on "Implementing the Aims of the Rio Earth Summit." Participants heard keynote speeches on the topic and a panel discussion on "Implementing Agenda 21 in Switzerland" in plenary and met in several simultaneous workshops. The meeting was chaired by Jürg Krummenacher, Executive Director of Caritas Switzerland.

PLENARY

Chair Krummenacher opened the day's discussion by recalling the Earth Summit and asking how Agenda 21 and the plans of action produced by the Rio follow-up conferences can be implemented. He highlighted the role of NGOs and the importance of Southern experiences with implementation.

Farida Akhter, President of People's Perspectives on Population (Bangladesh), addressed women's role in sustainable development. She said the term "sustainable development" illustrates the crisis of development -- that it is not sustainable. She called for a re-evaluation of global production patterns and consideration of what is more important, producing and distributing soft drinks or providing fresh drinking water for all. She noted that at global summits on food, population and women, the South was told to address these problems themselves, ultimately placing the burden on women in the South under the guise of "empowerment." She said that, despite good intentions, the plight of garment workers and child laborers will only be worsened by international standards that would limit trade. She cited shrimp exportation to the North as a cause of environmental destruction and loss of food security in Bangladesh. Regarding population, she said women are urged to use contraceptives while their overall health and the side effects of contraception are overlooked. She urged Switzerland to monitor the activities and impacts of its multinational corporations. She concluded that sustainable development does not require women; it is impossible without them.

Eduardo Caicedo, Director of Juan Tama Vocational and Agricultural School (Colombia), discussed the ecological aspects of sustainable development. He stated that while important environmental agreements were signed in Rio, it has been business as usual in the agricultural sector in Latin America -- deforestation and mono-culture planting continue. He described an example at the Ecuador-Colombia border where thousands of acres of trees were cut and replaced with African palm trees, which produce half as much volume of a less valuable oil than the trees they replaced. He highlighted the need to develop and implement a strategy that not only includes moral imperatives but also addresses the immediate interests of people, particularly those at the margins of society both in the South and the North. He said this can be achieved by respecting the natural cycles of the elements and utilizing the diversity of traditional knowledge from many parts of the world. He also

emphasized the need to develop new curricula in schools that incorporate lessons from traditional knowledge and teach different pedagogic principles, including solidarity, justice and reciprocity.

Leonor Briones, Professor of Economics, University of the Philippines, spoke on the economics of sustainable development. She said financing the implementation of Agenda 21 is necessary at all levels, and outlined methods available to governments for raising revenue. She noted that taxes are often levied indirectly through methods such as a consumer tax, which places the burden on the poor. She cited privatization as another source of revenue that often leads to monopolies on utilities such as communications and water. She emphasized that borrowed money comes with conditions such as structural adjustment programmes that eliminate potential gains. She noted the increase in debt servicing costs due to currency deflation since the Asian financial crisis, and highlighted that this forced the Philippine government to reduce expenditures on education and health. Regarding the North/South Manifesto for Sustainable Development, she expressed particular support for guidelines calling for: Switzerland to provide legal expertise on the issue of debt relief; business and industry to focus on the poorer developing countries; and the North and South to learn from one another. Noting that \$300 million of drug money alone is laundered through banks on a daily basis, she called for implementation of the Tobin tax and regulation of banks.

Martin Khor, Third World Network (Malaysia), said the Rio process acknowledged a world environmental crisis and linked it to economic and development crises, focused on future and present needs, stressed equity in the environment and development debates, and promised aid to developing countries. He lamented the loss of the Rio spirit as demonstrated by events such as the establishment of the WTO, the decline in aid, and increased indebtedness. He warned of the West's use of the WTO for global economic governance. He stressed that the South will not change consumption and production patterns until the North does and said Switzerland should set an example. He emphasized that globalization is not inevitable. He commended the North/South Manifesto but said it does not address specific factors of globalization nor mention what the Swiss can do to combat its negative effects. He said globalization requires a global response from civil society and suggested that the Swiss set up an emergency alert system to monitor and inform on developments in the IMF and the WTO. He acknowledged grassroots activists as heroes, praised youth involvement and urged Swiss youth to connect with youth in developing countries because the world is in their hands.

The floor was then opened for comments. One participant questioned the existence of "free" markets in globalization, and another responded that they are not free but rather monopoly markets. Another inquired about the possibility of avoiding the vicious cycle of borrowing from the World Bank and the IMF. Sound economic policies were recommended in response.

WORKSHOPS

The Role of NGOs in Implementing Agenda 21 and Other Commitments of the Follow-up Intergovernmental Negotiating Processes: Workshop participants discussed the pivotal role NGOs play in translating global policies into concrete measures at local, national and regional levels, and in deepening and broadening existing international instruments, particularly as highlighted by the experience with the climate change convention. Participants also discussed approaches to NGO involvement in both intergovernmental and national policy making and implementation, and concluded that multifaceted strategies tailored to national circumstances and the specific issues under negotiation are required.

Patents on Life and the Conservation of Biological Diversity: Panelists focused discussion on conflicts between the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs), highlighting the negative impacts of TRIPs on biodiversity. Participants discussed strategies to exclude all life forms from patentability, particularly with respect to the TRIPs review in 1999. Participants also highlighted the upcoming Swiss referendum on genetic engineering, which would ban patents on plants and animals and could have a major impact on the TRIPs review.

Debt Relief as a Development Tool: Participants emphasized that debt relief is not sustainable by itself but that the concept of creative debt relief allows for new forms of cooperation between government, civil society and the private sector. Counterpart funds have the potential to become financially viable institutions that give the poor access to financial services, but concepts must be developed to make them more politically autonomous.

Women's Rights and Reproductive Health: An Important Component of Sustainable Development: Discussion focused on how to place sexual and reproductive health at the center of the sustainable development debate, advocate for women's rights and empowerment, and increase access to reproductive health services. Participants emphasized the importance of education (of women, men and youth) on women's rights and reproductive and sexual health and highlighted the use of media, particularly radio, role models and youth centers, among others. Participants also underscored the importance of women's economic empowerment, highlighting the success of market women's networks, and the need to adapt technical cooperation modalities to respond to people's needs on the ground.

Disaster Prevention in the South: Ecological Aspects -- The Case of Bangladesh: Workshop participants considered natural and man-made disasters, long-term rehabilitation programmes to assure financial resources and restore livelihoods after natural disasters, and how to define sustainability for the poorest of the poor.

Sustainable Cooperation for Health and Sustainable Health Care: Participants discussed financial constraints in the health sector and the importance of partnerships. The example of South African women's health care groups demonstrated the importance of basing health care programmes on local knowledge and conditions and incorporating people's needs and demands. The workshop concluded that sustainable decentralized health care structures are possible if donor agencies and government structures renounce ownership of health programmes.

Employment in Development Cooperation -- Implications for Switzerland: The benefits from the exchange of personnel in development cooperation were highlighted. These personnel: help to sustain developmental processes at the local level; act as a bridge between the North and the South; facilitate the exchange of information and cultural insights with the South; and play an active role in Swiss society upon their return. The important role of youth exchanges was also emphasized.

Mountains of the World: Environmental, Economic, Cultural and Recreational Challenges: Participants noted limited efforts to promote sustainable mountain development and concluded that mountains are important eco-regions that must be placed at the center of economic and political decision-making. Participants highlighted problems including resource degradation, emerging resource conflicts and minimal economic interest in mountains. Measures to enhance recreational use, promote aware-

ness of water scarcity and value water as an economic resource were also emphasized. Participants agreed on the need to, *inter alia*: sensitize people to problems and opportunities in mountain regions; strengthen the rights of mountain peoples and organizations; and value and compensate mountain resources by establishing economic transactions that benefit mountain peoples for outside use of mountain resources.

Practicing Sustainability: Implementing Agenda 21 at the Local Level: Discussion focused on the new values that Local Agenda 21s bring to the traditional planning process, including: broader citizen participation; a trans-sectoral approach in policies; and North/South aspects in local policy discussions.

Forest Certification: Trade Barrier or Safeguard of the World's Forests?: Participants agreed that certification schemes can improve forest management. They discussed whether there is a market for labelled timber from certified, sustainably managed forests, particularly in the South where a substantial part of tropical timber is consumed domestically. Participants agreed that forest certification cannot replace regulation but is a promising initiative for safeguarding the world's forests.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel on "Implementing Agenda 21 in Switzerland" was moderated by Erich Gysling, journalist, and was composed of Rosmarie Bär, Swiss Coalition of Development Organisations, Thierry Freyvogel, President of the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries, Michael Kohn, Chairman of the "Capital and Economy" Institute, and Anne Petitpierre, President of the Council for Sustainable Development. Panelists discussed the dilemma of the long time horizon required to integrate sustainability into people's lives, given the urgency of sustainable development. It was noted that this shift is a gradual process and must occur in all sectors of society. One panelist said Switzerland has done little since Rio to promote sustainable development but produce reports; another disagreed, citing efforts to enact energy taxes, among others. Panelists emphasized the power of the media, the impact of public opinion on policy makers, politicians' obligation to implement Agenda 21 and international environmental treaties, and the importance of action and change by the business community.

One panelist stressed that the Kyoto Protocol's CO₂ emission reduction targets are inadequate to tackle climate change, while another emphasized the need for a step-by-step process, as cooperation by business is essential and would be lost if unrealistic targets are pressed. One panelist supported an energy tax as long as it does not harm the Swiss industry's position in the international economy. Another encouraged a dialogue and voluntary action before taking compulsory measures. One participant asked about alternative energy development and why so much investment had gone into nuclear power. Another expressed concern over the North's perspective of "giving something up" instead of one of "responsibility." A panelist stressed the lack of a Southern perspective in the Manifesto, noting that the South has much to offer the North. Another said aid has not flowed to the South and that sustainable development must be viewed as an opening of Switzerland *vis á vis* developing countries. One participant expressed his disappointment with the discussion, said Switzerland has been slow in promoting sustainable development and asked panelists what their vision and plans of action were with respect to implementation of Agenda 21. One panelist responded that decentralized implementation is taking place but agreed that more initiatives and action at all levels are needed. Others stressed Local Agenda 21 programmes and cooperation with the business world.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY: Participants will hear keynote speeches and engage in discussion on "A Closer Look at Solidarity" from 9:00-12:30 in the Federal Parliament Building.

WORKSHOPS: Several simultaneous workshops will convene in the Hotel Kreuz from 14:00-16:00.

PANEL DISCUSSION: A panel discussion, "What Does the Foundation for Solidarity Mean for Switzerland?" will be conducted from 16:30-18:00 in the Federal Parliament Building.