

Agreements for Sustaining the Future Environment

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) took place in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992. The primary goal of the conference was to find an equitable balance between the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations and to lay the foundation for a global partnership between developed and developing countries as well as between Governments and sectors of civil society based on common understanding of shared needs and interests.

In Rio, 172 Governments, including 108 heads of State or Government, adopted Agenda 21, a global plan of action to promote sustainable development; and two legally binding conventions, one on Climate Change and the other on biological Diversity, both of which were opened for signature at the Conference. At the same time, negotiations got underway for a Convention to Combat Desertification, which was opened for signature in October 1994 and entered into force in December 1996. Some brief descriptions of the documents follow.

AGENDA 21 POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR WOMEN AND FORESTRY

Chapter 11 of Agenda 21 entitled "Combating Deforestation" defines the policy framework for women and forestry. It stipulates:

11.2 ...More effective measures and approaches are often required at the national level to improve and harmonize policy formulation,



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planning and programming; legislation measures and instruments; development patterns; participation of the general public, especially women and indigenous people; involvement of the youth; roles of the private sector, local organizations; non-governmental organizations and cooperatives... It is especially important to ensure a rational and holistic approach to the sustainable and environmentally sound development of forests.

11.4 ...Some of the major activities...are as follows:

(b) promoting participation of the private sector, labour unions, rural cooperatives, local communities, indigenous peoples, youth, women, user groups and non-governmental organizations in forest-related activities, and access to information and training programmes within the national context.

(c) Establishing and/or strengthening institutions for forest education and training as well as forestry industries, for developing an adequate cadre of trained and skilled staff at the professional, technical and vocational levels, with emphasis on youth and women.

11.14 Governments, with the participation of...women...should act to maintain and expand existing vegetative cover..., major activities should include:

(i) Launching or improving opportunities for participation of all people including youth, women, ...in the formulation, development and implementation of forest-related programmes and other activities...;

11.19 Essential means for effectively implementing the activities include training and development of appropriate skills, working facilities and conditions, public motivation and awareness. Specific activities include:

(c) Supporting local organizations, communities, non-governmental organizations and private land owners, in particular women, youth, farmers and indigenous people/shifting cultivators, through extension and provision of inputs and training.

11.28 The success and effectiveness of the programme depends on the availability of skilled personnel. specialized training is an important factor in this regard. New emphasis should be given to the incorporation of women.

Source: Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development, United Nations, New York, 1992.

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY (CBD)

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was opened for signature at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in June 1992 and became legally binding on 29 December 1993. As of 3 December 1996, 165 countries, including the European Union, had ratified the Convention.

The purposes of the Convention are to conserve biological species, genetic resources, habitats and ecosystems; to ensure the sustainable use of biological materials; and to provide for the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from genetic resources.

Included in the Convention are provisions for both "ex-situ conservation" --conservation of biological elements outside their natural habitats-- and "in-situ conservation" --conservation of ecosystems and natural habitats and the maintenance of species in their natural surroundings. Maintenance of natural habitats is essential for the conservation of biologically diverse species which would otherwise face extinction.

CONVENTION PROVISIONS

The most important provisions of the Convention include:

- The requirement that countries adopt regulations to conserve their biological resources;
- The legal responsibility of governments for the environmental impact in other countries of activities within their jurisdiction, including those of private corporations;
- Funding to assist developing countries in implementing the convention's provisions (to be administered through Global Environment Facility (GEF), pending the determination of a permanent institutional structure);
- The transfer of technology to developing countries on preferential and concessional terms, where such transfer does not prejudice intellectual property rights or patents;
- Participation in biotech research by countries providing genetic resources;
- Fair access to benefits of genetic research by countries providing genetic resources;
- Compensation to developing countries for extraction of their genetic materials;
- Commitment to build capacity in developing countries to implement the convention through training, awareness-raising and technology transfer exercises.

Source: United Nations/Department of Public Information. "The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity: A Constructive Response to a Global Problem". DPI/1859/SD--97-01261, January 1997.

UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was finalized by negotiators from 150 countries and was adopted in New York on 9 May 1992. It was then opened for signature in Rio de Janeiro during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The Convention entered into force on 21 March 1994 and today boasts some 165 States Parties.

The Convention established a process for responding to climate change over the decades to come. In particular, it set up a system whereby Governments report information on their national greenhouse gas emissions and climate change strategies. This information is reviewed on a regular basis in order to track the Convention's progress. In addition, developed countries agreed to promote the transfer of funding and technology to help developing countries respond to climate change. They were also committed to taking measures aimed at returning their greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000.

As of December 1996, the Berlin Mandate talks on future developed-country commitments were preparing to enter the final negotiating phase. An agreed text must be circulated to Governments for review by June 1997. This text will be the subject of continued intense negotiations at meetings to be held in Bonn in March, August and October. Some of the key issues now being debated are these:

Binding timetables and targets for emissions reductions. A number of Governments (including some EU members) are calling for 10 per cent reductions in CO₂ by 2005. Some (such as the lowlying island States) want an even more ambitious cut of 20 per cent by that date. Still others (including Australia, Canada, Japan and the United States) argue that a 2005 date is unrealistic and propose objectives for the 2010-2015 period.

Coordinated vs. flexible policies. Some Governments (notably EU members) argue the need for internationally coordinated policies. Others say it would be more cost-efficient to

allow each country to adopt the policies and measures best suited to its national circumstances.

Common vs. differentiated commitments. There are differing points of view on whether all developed countries should have the same targets and timetable, or whether it would be fairer if different countries had different commitments based on various possible formulae (e.g. per capita targets). Critics of differentiation are concerned that it poses too many methodological and political problems.

Implications for developing countries. The Berlin Mandate talks address new commitments for developed countries only (they also address how to advance the implementation of existing commitments by all parties). However, some developed countries have offered proposals that would allow other countries to adhere to any future agreement on a voluntary basis. Meanwhile, a number of developing countries want to address the agreement's possible impacts on their economies and trade.

Source: "Combating Global Warming: The Climate Change Convention", UN Department of Public Information. DPI/1872/SD-97-03716--February 1997.

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION IN THOSE COUNTRIES EXPERIENCING SERIOUS DROUGHT AND/OR DESERTIFICATION PARTICULARLY IN AFRICA

The Convention was adopted on 17 June 1994 and opened for signature in Paris in October that year. As of 14 January 1997, the Convention had been ratified by 60 countries. It entered into force on 26 December 1996.

The stated objective of the Convention is "to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa..." To achieve this goal, the Convention calls for action involving international cooperation and a partnership approach. It focuses on improving land productivity, rehabilitation of land, conservation and sustainable management of land and water

resources. Such action should also prevent the long-term consequences of desertification, including mass migration, species loss, climate change and the need for emergency assistance to populations in crisis.

The convention establishes a framework for national, sub regional and regional programmes to counter the degradation of drylands, including semi-arid grasslands and deserts. It calls on developed countries to:

- * Actively support the efforts of affected developing country parties to the Convention;
- * Provide "substantial financial resources" to assist affected developing country parties;
- * Promote the mobilization of adequate, timely and predictable financial resources from all official and private sources; and
- * Promote and facilitate access to appropriate technology, knowledge and know-how.

Desertification-affected countries are obliged to:

- * Give priority to combating desertification and drought by allocating adequate resources in accordance with capabilities;
- * Address the underlying causes of the problem and pay special attention to relevant socio-economic factors;
- * Promote awareness and the participation of local populations in action to combat desertification and drought; and
- * Provide an enabling environment through appropriate laws, policies and action programmes.

The Convention also aims to improve the efficiency of desertification aid to developing countries by coordinating donors' efforts and encouraging affected countries to set up national action plans to combat desertification with grass-roots participation, particularly with people who live off the land. Convention framers believed that local people, who are often poor, know more than anyone else about the fragile ecosystems in which they live and work and are thus in the best position to contribute to the fight against desertification.

A "bottom-up" approach to action is stressed by the Convention. A significant component of this approach is the protection, promotion and use of relevant traditional and local technology, knowledge, know-how and practices. It has become evident that desertification cannot be effectively addressed unless the people most affected are fully involved and committed. although the idea of participation has been accepted for many years, it has often been attached to old "top-down" ways of doing things.

People could participate, but key decisions were made elsewhere, often alienating those they intended to serve. By incorporating a "bottom-up" orientation in international law, the Convention breaks new ground and enhances the chances for success through partnership. It specifically underlines the important role played by women. It also stresses the special role of non-governmental organizations, particularly in ensuring implementation.

Source: United Nations Department of Public Information. "The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification: A New Response to an Age-Old Problem" DPI/1870/SD--97-03712, February 1997.

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