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**THE ROLE OF THE EU AT
THE WORLD SUMMIT
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT¹**

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (better known as the Rio Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, was seen by many as the beginning of a new ecological era. At this conference, the EU was granted “full participant status” giving it many of the same rights as the participating states.² At the same conference, the EU also committed itself to the concept of sustainable development. In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg, set out to evaluate the obstacles to progress and the results achieved ten years on since Rio. It therefore provided the perfect opportunity for a critical reflection regarding the EU’s engagement with the sustainability agenda by examining its priorities and actions during the Summit.

WSSD CONTEXT

The Johannesburg Summit should be seen as part of a post-millennium continuum that included the trade talks in Doha and the development talks in Monterey. The conclusions of these talks and the position adopted by the EU obviously influenced the EU’s priorities for the WSSD. Additionally, in preparing

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² Bretherton & Vogler, 1999, p. 91.

the EU mandate for the WSSD, the Commission issued two specific Communications: “Ten Years after Rio: preparing for the WSSD in 2002”¹ and “Towards a Global Partnership for sustainable development”.² Interestingly, the conclusions of the Development, rather than Environment, Council listed in detail the EU’s priorities.³ It appears that the WSSD agenda was seen by many as having more to do with development issues than sustainability issues, although in theory the chef de file responsibilities were shared between Commissioners’ NIELSON and WALLSTRÖM, with co-ordination further enhanced by the presence of the Commission President PRODI.

The EU’s position was also influenced by internal developments. The sixth environmental action programme (EAP) “Our Future, Our Choice” formed an important input into the Rio +10 process, especially as it highlighted the need for improved integration and implementation.⁴ The experience of the “Cardiff Process”, which attempts to ensure that different sectoral Councils agreed to take account of sustainable development issues in their actions, and report to future EU summits on their strategies for integration, was also influential on EU thinking.⁵ This process attempts to ensure that the EU and the member states are taking the issue of integration more seriously.⁶ Finally, the EU’s WSSD position had to take into account Article 6 of the Treaty of Amsterdam which states that “environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of Community policies and activities ... in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development”. Although, as JOHN HONTELEZ argues “it’s still words on paper, but the fact that sustainable development is part of the Treaty gives us a better political framework”.⁷

The EU attempted to present itself as the most ecologically advanced bloc present at the Summit. In the build up to the Summit, Commissioner Wallström had argued that the “EU has to play the leading role in ensuring that Johannesburg delivers concrete progress towards sustainability goals”.⁸ The Johannesburg Summit was therefore an important stage for the EU to prove that its commitment to sustainable development represented more than just rhetoric. This view was supported by the various NGOs present who believed that “this summit can only deliver meaningful results if the EU shows true leadership”.⁹ As the World Development Movement argued “the US is undoubtedly the rogue state threatening the very concept of sustainable development, but it is the EU that has the potential to save the day”.¹⁰ This paper examines in detail whether this view of the EU was correct.

EU PRIORITIES

The EU argued that it supported the Summit’s priorities as outlined by KOFI ANNAN: water, health, biodiversity, energy, and agriculture. It called for a Plan of Action which included targets and timetables “as they alone will make the inter-

¹ CEC, 2001.

² CEC, 2002a.

³ CoM, 2002.

⁴ CEC, 2001, p. 13.

⁶ Burchell & Lightfoot, 2001.

⁷ In: Kazakina 2002: 12.

⁸ Wallström, 2002a.

⁹ FoEE, 2002.

⁵ Fergusson, M. et al, 2001.¹⁰ World Development Movement, 2002.

national community accountable for delivering on its promises".¹ It was important for the EU to achieve time bound targets in specific areas. For example, early on in the summit agreement was reached on protection of fish stocks, education strategies in Africa and gender disparity. However, as Danish State Secretary STAUR argued they were relatively uncontentious and that their importance should not be over-emphasised. The EU main priorities were therefore:

- Halve the number of people without access to clean water and sanitation by 2015
- Halt the spread of communicable diseases and save approximately 8 million lives by 2010
- Halt and reverse the current loss of in natural resources and biodiversity by 2015
- To provide affordable and clean energy to eradicate poverty, improve energy efficiency and increase the share of renewable energy sources
- Meet UN Development Target of 0.7 per cent GDP.²

It is clear that these priorities match, with one important exception, the Summit's priorities as outlined by KOFI ANNAN: water, health, biodiversity, energy, and agriculture. The following discussion represents a form of initial mini sustainability audit on the EU, using these priorities.

Water

Poor water is a major global environmental problem. The EU wished to meet the Millennium goal of halving the number of people without access to safe water by 2015 and sets a parallel target of halving the number of people without access to sanitation by the same date. The Summit agreed to the sanitation target as well as reaffirming the complementary Millennium Development Goal target. The World Development Movement stated that the EU had "played a welcome role in pushing the US to accept a target".³ To help achieve these goals, the EU launched the Water Initiative. Under this agreement, the Union will set up partnerships with developing countries, sharing EU expertise on sustainable management and distribution of water and providing financial support through the EU's development programme. The EU argued that dealing effectively with the water crisis in the developing world required large-scale investment through public-private partnerships, although many NGOs are concerned that this signals the start of the creeping privatisation of vulnerable water industries.⁴ This example clearly highlights the potential contradictions inherent in the EU's sustainable development strategy.

Health

The EU ambition was to halt the spread of communicable diseases and save approximately 8 million lives by 2010. This commitment reflected the fact that

¹ CEC, 2002a.² CEC, 2002a.³ World Development Movement, 2002.⁴ Watkins, 2002.

the EU, via the sixth EAP, for the first time made an explicit link between health and the environment. It argued for the full implementation of the precautionary principle due to the impact of a poor environment on vulnerable groups, such as children and the elderly. It turned out that health was the most difficult issue for the Summit and it was the last issue to be resolved in the Action Plan, showing how EU ambitions can be frustrated. The Action Plan called for enhanced health education with the objective of achieving improved health literacy on a global basis by 2010. It also reaffirmed the Millennium Development Goal of reducing, by 2015, mortality rates for infants and children under five by two-thirds and the General Assembly resolution on reducing HIV prevalence among men and women aged 15-24 by 25 per cent by 2005.

Biodiversity

These contradictions could also be seen in the EU's priority for biodiversity: halting and reversing the current loss of natural resources and biodiversity by 2015. Both the sixth EAP and Natura 2000, with its sectoral bio-diversity action plans, acknowledge the threat of losing the unique resource of nature and biodiversity within Europe. However, biodiversity within the EU is under threat from its own actions. The promotion of unsustainable farming and fishing policies, the funding of projects such as the Alqueva dam¹ and the Via Baltica projects² show that the EU commitment to protecting biodiversity diminishes when it conflicts with other policy goals. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising given the fact that protecting biodiversity can conflict with economic development that the Summit target fell a long way short of the EU ambition. The Summit outcome to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction in the current rate of loss of biological diversity does not even reverse the current loss. The reluctance of states like the USA to agree to time-bound targets in this area highlights a major problem for the EU: to achieve its targets it needed to gain the support of other states who may not share their environmental priorities.

Energy

The EU was committed to reaching agreement on affordable and clean energy to eradicate poverty, improve energy efficiency and increase the share of renewable energy sources. As Commissioner WALLSTRÖM argued there can be "no sustainable development with sustainable energy development".³ One of the main sticking points was a time-bound target on renewable energy. According to MARGARET BECKETT, the Head of the UK delegation, the EU was united in its desire to get strong language and time-bound targets on renewable energy. The EU target was that renewable energy should make up 15 per cent of the total energy source by 2010.

¹ See Goncalves, 2000.

² See Coward, 2002, p. 27.

³ Wallström, 2002b.

MARGARET BECKETT also dismissed claims that divisions were apparent in the EU position, despite NGO claims that Germany, for example, wanted to hold out for a better deal. However, according to Commissioner WALLSTRÖM, the fact that there was an overwhelming majority against time-bound targets for renewable energy, including an “unholy alliance between the US and developing countries” meant that the compromise was the best that could be achieved.¹ This view was reiterated by Commission President PRODI who argued that the WSSD outcome was a “compromise in the right direction”.² After this compromise, the EU launched a coalition of like-minded states who are committed to increasing their use of renewable energies through quantified, time-bound targets. This “coalition of the willing” or “the OPEC of renewables” aims to continue to put pressure upon the “unwilling” and will push for a renewable energy target that represents a floor not a ceiling.³

Development Aid

The EU fell a long way short of its promised goal of reaching the United Nations’ long-standing official development assistance target of 0.7 per cent of GDP before this summit. Only four member states (Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) meet this target. To reach the target, the EU pledged to boost aid, although it did stress that they were constrained by stability and growth pact that sets limits on government spending and borrowing. Despite this, in Johannesburg, the EU committed itself to substantial increase in Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), which would cement the EU’s position as the world’s biggest donor of development aid. Alongside the amount of money pledged however, is the effect of development aid. For example, recent claims by Fern suggest that almost 50 per cent of EU aid for African road development will damage forests.⁴ This example shows how difficult meeting the objectives of Article 6 can be.

AREAS OF CONTROVERSY

The above discussion on Development Aid leads very nicely into a discussion of agriculture, one of KOFI ANNAN’s priorities but not an EU one. Oxfam ranks the EU first according to an index which measures protectionism, arguing that the EU places high tariffs on the two most important industries in developing countries: agriculture and textiles. The main policy culprit according to Oxfam is, unsurprisingly, the CAP, which has a double whammy effect on developing countries. Firstly, EU farmers are protected from cheaper imports by protectionism measures. Secondly, they receive subsidies, which despite recent reforms, leads to

¹ Interview, 3 Sept. 2002, Johannesburg.

² EU Press Conference, 3 Sept. 2002, Johannesburg.

³ Wallström, 2002b.

⁴ Cronin, 2002.

over-production and hence surpluses. These surpluses are then “dumped” on the world market, undercutting farmers in the developing world. It is a sobering thought that every cow in the EU has a higher income than 50 per cent of the world’s population.¹

Many NGOs argue that member states, especially those with large agricultural sectors, would rather give aid than open up EU markets for trade, especially to states who could undercut them. “The strategic interests of some southern European states has meant that politics rather than poverty has dictated the aid budget.”² Developments like the “Everything but Arms” initiative are welcomed by various NGOs, but they argue that it is unlikely that LDCs will be granted full access to all EU markets. Although the Mid-term review of the CAP in June 2002 appeared to support claims made by Development Commissioner NIELSON that the internal and external pressures on EU to reform CAP are “all pulling the EU in the same direction”, his proviso of “how far and how fast is up to member states” is crucial.³ The FISCHLER reforms have come under attack from a number of member states. Indeed those states opposed to the reforms argue that Commissioner FISCHLER has exceeded the provisions outlined in Agenda 2000, which they argue only mandated a review of technical adjustments.⁴ It is therefore clear that despite the EU saying it is fully committed to reducing trade-distorting farm subsidies reforming the CAP may not be as easy.

It is clear that there is a strong link between agriculture and more general trade issues. According to Prime Minister RASMUSSEN “when trade advances, poverty retreats”.⁵ The EU’s position was that market liberalisation was the way out of poverty. The EU preparation argued that “Delegates should recognise the primary role of domestic resources, as well as the role that trade liberalisation and private financial flows, notably foreign direct investment (FDI) can play in generating more resources for sustainable development”. This is not that surprising as the EU’s position has long been that there is no inherent conflict between international trade and environmental protection.⁶

This position had become clear during the Doha Trade talks where the EU, under the guise of DG Trade, produced a 1,000-page document that set out liberalisation demands. KEVIN WATKINS of Oxfam called it a “bananas for banking negotiating strategy”, as the EU promises to open up its agricultural and textile markets to its competitors were conditional on the very same countries liberalising access to banking and insurance markets, markets in which European companies have a competitive advantage.⁷ It was alleged that similar conditions found their way into the WSSD as a result of a paper on finance and trade issues proposed by the EU (DG Trade) and the USA, which eventually became the

¹ Friends of Europe, 2002.

² The Independent, 28/1/99.

³ Press Conference, Johannesburg 28 August 2002.

⁴ Zilbermann, 2002, p. 8.

⁵ Rasmussen, 2002.

⁶ Baker, 2002, p. 319.

⁷ Denny & Elliott, 2002.

Chairperson's text. This section of text was criticised by ANTONIO HILL of Oxfam¹ for two reasons. Firstly they objected to the substance of the paper, which they believed reneged on many principles included at Rio, especially the precautionary principle. They also argue that it reflected too much of the global liberalisation agenda and equalled privatisation of the implementation of sustainable development. Secondly, they objected to the lack of transparency in the process, arguing that both the member states and the developing countries were ignored. This claim was refuted by DG Trade who argued the EU/US non-paper was produced to facilitate negotiations, not to "stitch-up" agenda as WWF claimed. According to one person in DG Trade it was an "innocent attempt to keep the negotiations going rather than a cynical attempt to manipulate the agenda".¹

THE EU AS A DIVIDED ACTOR?

This discussion highlights a major problem faced by the EU in international negotiations: who negotiates what? The EU is an actor but so too are the member states. Sustainable development does not fall neatly into existing bureaucratic competencies. For example, the three pillars of sustainable development – trade, development and environment – reflect the remits of different DGs and Councils. In one area, trade, the EU has exclusive competence. However, even in this area there was controversy, with some member states unhappy with DG Trade's lack of consultation. It was argued that the EU/ USA non-paper was even "disowned" by some member states who believed that DG Trade had over-stepped its competence by removing references to the precautionary principle from the text. It was therefore argued that the EU position reflected too much of DG Trade's neo-liberal ethos rather than the more trade with a social conscience views of DG Development or the ecological views of DG Environment. For example, FoEE argued that whilst the EU is a leader on many issues at the summit, it blocked progress on binding corporate rules.² The World Development Movement argued that this position reflects the interests of EU corporations³ and Green MEPs argued that it was officials from DG Trade that opposed legally binding rules.⁴

With this in mind it was crucial that DG Environment worked closely with DG Development to ensure their concerns are heard. The main problem is that neither DG is seen as a strong DG. It was also argued that the lack of chemistry between POUL NIELSON, Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, and Wallström, caused problems for the EU's position.⁵ Green MEPs have tabled a parliamentary question asking why the responsibility was split between the two. This question is based on the fact that they claim a splintered approach, including "considerable differences of priorities in their negotiating stance", between Development and Environment officials allowed trade concerns to take a higher priority than environmental ones.⁶ As MONICA FRASSONI argued: "We have always supported the idea that the Commission has to represent the EU in these for a [international summits] but we had the impression of a serious lack of unity

¹ Press Conference, Johannesburg 26 August 2002.

and coherence in the EU delegation, which led to a diminished efficiency in the negotiating process.”⁷ WALLSTRÖM, who argued that the Commission spoke with one strong voice, denied these claims.⁸

¹ Interview, 29 August 2002, Johannesburg.

² FoEE, 2002.

³ World Development Movement, 2002.

⁴ Cronin & Banks, 2002, p. 4.

⁵ Ryborg, 2002, p. 37.

⁶ Cronin and Banks, 2002, p. 4.

⁷ Cronin and Banks, 2002, p. 4.

⁸ Wallström, 2002b.

CONCLUSION

EU Commissioner WALLSTRÖM argued that the World Summit offered a wake up call to the world and that the EU had a “determination to exercise leadership” on global sustainable development issues at the Summit.¹ According to the EU Council President, Prime Minister RASMUSSEN of Denmark, the EU was “driving issues in Johannesburg” and that “the EU had made a substantial impact on the WSSD”.² As this paper has shown, the EU did exercise leadership on many crucial issues, most notably climate change.³ However, as DANIEL MITTLER argues “on many key issues, the EU is part of the problem rather than the solution”.⁴ BAKER⁵ argues that this can be explained by the incremental nature of EU environmental policy-making, which acts as a brake on the development of radically new policies.

Incrementalism makes the chances of successful translation of the commitment to sustainable development into actual policy dependent upon the extent to which the required policy changes can be fitted with existing policy commitments. Policy proposals that fit with the strategy of environmental quality management stand a greater chance of acceptance, while policies that fit more closely with the second, more radical, pattern have little, if any, chance of success. The concept of sustainable development has been interpreted by the Union (and its member states) to fit within the confines of managerial as opposed to radical policy solutions.⁶

This incrementalism clearly explains why the negotiating position of the EU for the WSSD was criticised by NGOs for not being ambitious enough. However, it should also be noted that there were many states that did not share the EU’s view on the importance of sustainable development, notably the USA. Therefore the WSSD outcome, although perhaps “only a qualified success”, owes much to the actions of the EU.⁷ However, this outcome also shows that there is still a long way for the EU to travel on its long march to sustainability.

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¹ Wallström, 2002a.

² CEC, 2002b.

³ See Bretherton, 2002, p. 2.

⁵ Baker, 1997.

⁶ Baker, 1997, p. 102.

⁷ Friends of Europe, 2002.

⁴ FoEE, 2002.

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