

Vision and reality

towards implementation

Crispian Olver, Director-General, Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, speaks to Claire Horton about the issues which are expected to dominate the WSSD.

CH: What are the reasons for the non-implementation of the Rio Agenda and what is the South African government's approach to ensuring that commitments agreed at the Johannesburg Summit are honoured?

CO: One of the key elements of this summit was to conduct a thorough assessment of Rio and the extent of the failures and successes of the Rio decade. That assessment pointed out that the biggest flaw in the implementation of Agenda 21 has been the failure to deliver on the economic and social development aspect. Obviously there are also criticisms on the environmental side, but since Rio we have put in place an impressive array of international agreements on the environment. The challenge is to implement them.

Many countries have been negatively impacted by globalisation. They have been ejected from the world economy. We have had extreme difficulty in getting an equitable global trading system in place that benefits developing countries.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) has got to address right up front the question of implementation. We have tried to make the summit focus entirely on what concrete actions are going to be taken. There has been a huge debate about restructuring the Commission for Sustainable

Development (CSD). We want to try and elevate its status within the UN system. We are lifting a lot of the CSD issues up to the level of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which is the highest organ for dealing with economic and social issues. One of the problems of the CSD has been that every year we go back into negotiating text. We have agreed that we are only going to do text negotiations every two to three years and the intervening years are going to focus on implementation.

CH: To what extent has civil society been able to influence the South African government's position? How has government dealt with the different views amongst civil society constituencies?

CO: We've followed quite a thorough process of consulting civil society before every one of our preparatory committee meetings. I think the key stakeholders have been quite effective in

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raising issues and raising the prominence of issues. For example, the youth section has lobbied very effectively to get a very substantive focus on children and youth in the WSSD. We have canvassed the economic platform for the summit very extensively both with labour and business. The position that we

have developed reflects a consensus between government and stake holders that the biggest obstacle to sustainable world development is the problem of global poverty.

We have agreed that we need to move away from the old Overseas Development Aid (ODA) debate and talk about how we reposition developing countries in terms of the global economy. The Rio debate was very focused on aid as the instrument by which we will achieve most of our objectives. While ODA is important, I think our position now is much more nuanced. It is more about an integrated approach to the restructuring of the global trading system, the promotion of socially responsible investment, the focus on corporate responsibility and accountability, not just on environmental programmes. That is the core concept that we have developed collectively here in South Africa.

CH: What impact has the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) had in formulating government's position on the WSSD?

CO: Nepad has had quite a significant impact. The argument we have presented at the WSSD is that Nepad really forms the

basis for sustainable development in Africa. We have used the Nepad model to focus on good governance, addressing key social concerns, the focus on the economic pillar, growth, and investment and the environmental side. We have tried to roll that model out in the Africa chapter. A lot of other regions are responding to it. Latin America, the Asian group, Europe, eastern Europe and the small island developing states are all coming up with particular initiatives. Once again, the problem is implementation.

CH: How will the issues of trade, access to markets and finance be dealt with at the WSSD?

CO: Trade, market access and finance are the big sticking points at the moment. As these issues are about the economic platform for the summit and about mobilising resources for development, it is not surprising that they are unresolved. The developed world has accused us of trying to back track from the Monterrey consensus and trying to conduct new trade negotiations in the WSSD. We don't think that's correct. There's been a build up of international agreements running up to Johannesburg. The challenge is to turn them into a set of practical interventions that deliver the resources for development. Rather than go back to the old policy debates, we think it's now important to take National Development Goals (NDGs), take Doha, take Monterrey and say, right, let's accept these agreements and conventions and turn them into reality. The developed countries have been led through a succession of agreements to this point. It will be extremely difficult now for them to back out of, say, the programme to halve the number of people without access to clean drinking water. Now they have to put their money where their mouth is, or else accept that they

didn't negotiate in good faith.

I think we will get a resolution on the trade market access and finance issues. It will probably be at a fairly general level, because a lot of the details have to be worked out in relation to specific regional initiatives. But it's been very important that we have had this dispute, because it's created a dynamism in the run up to Johannesburg where the world is now focussing on the trade and finance aspects of sustainable development.

CH: South Africa played a key role in trying to broker a declaration in the Prep-Com 4 meeting held in Bali. What were the key obstacles to reaching a declaration?

‘Trade, market access and finance, which are about mobilising resources for development, are the big sticking points at the moment.’

CO: The obstacles are trade, market access and finance. There were also disputes around the question of governance. Developed countries were putting a lot of emphasis on domestic governance. They were saying that rooting out corruption, the rule of law, macro-economic stability and management, and democracy were all the key issues that had to be in the text. Some developing countries opposed that. Our view from South Africa is that good governance is crucial for sustainable development. However, we emphasise that good governance is essential at all levels. This includes the international level, where, for far too long, governance has been based on \$1, one vote and not one country, one vote. For example, there has been a failure to integrate the work of the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO with the development focus of the UN system. The other obstacles were the additional targets for

sanitation and energy, which we think are crucial to complement the millennium development goal. We also want to bring an energy target into the summit. Energy is crucial to poverty eradication. It helps children study at night, it is important for small and micro enterprises, it improves people's quality of life.

CH: There is strong criticism that the WSSD is being hijacked by a multinational corporation (MNC) or neo-liberal agenda.

CO: I don't think so. I think in some respects the WSSD is making inroads into their agenda. We have brought the issue of corporate responsibility much more strongly onto the agenda than in Rio. With the scandals in

the US corporate sector, the eyes of the world are on the corporates and their accounting practices. We are trying to extend the corporate responsibility agenda beyond just the environmental field. Sustainable development is much more than that. We've got to talk about issues around labour standards, child labour, social investment, socially responsible investment and investment in developing countries. These are all part of the new definition of corporate responsibility. We would like to go beyond that. We want this to be more than simply a voluntaristic regime. We could have moved a little bit more firmly in terms of regulation of multinationals. We have not won that issue and there will be some unfinished business on that agenda. Nonetheless we have advanced the agenda, particularly concerning corporate reporting.

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