

Should the 2 billion people living in drylands be more hopeful after CSD17?

The 17th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), a two year cycle where among other issues agriculture, rural development, land, drought, desertification and Africa were discussed, is now finished and most delegates are simply satisfied with the fact that they actually managed to agree on a text. Which could be considered progress since the last CSD cycle did not provide any agreed text.

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But does the text include really innovative policies, and does it call for actions which will make a difference for the people living in the drylands of the world? We are afraid that the answer is NO. Once again international negotiations about global problems have failed to deliver in terms of agreeing on the need to make changes and to suggest clear innovative actions to reach sustainable development and improve the living conditions of the 1.5 billion people in drylands that are threatened by desertification and land degradation. Old conflicts and disagreements about commitments, funding and implementation have erupted between the developing and developed countries once again. National interests and agendas have come in the way of global solutions to global problems. The lack of a cooperative integrated approach to worldwide challenges seems to become more common in current global environmental negotiations and agreements.

Getting lost in language, terms and the aridity of discussions

The delegations struggled to agree on new terms and language, but also more surprisingly on some old terms being introduced. Endless discussions took place on what was meant by 'marginalised groups', what is 'conservation agriculture', what are 'regreening activities', and even more shockingly what is meant by 'sustainable', more than 17 years after Rio 92 and 20 years after the Bruntland report in 87!! When did the CSD become an arena of philosophical debate on semantics? Is it due to the poor knowledge of concepts within the delegations? Or is this just another excuse to not have to agreement on language, innovative solutions and practices in a collective strong will?

A fragmented process

The negotiations held at CSD17 were not helped by the fact that the discussions on the themes were separated from each other. How can one discuss and suggest actions to

combat desertification and drought separately? How can one discuss agriculture issues, its sustainability in dryland areas without discussing the causes and effects of desertification? And how can one agree on actions to combat desertification without solving land tenure issues? This fragmentation of the themes was a problem in the negotiations. Precious time was wasted to agree on where to place this and that language, on whether to move entire paragraphs to the cross-cutting section or whether any text on financing should be kept for the section on means of implementation.

In the meantime, several delegations did not want to discuss certain issues, such as carbon sequestration as they were considered as climate issues which are to be discussed at the UNFCCC. Others did not want to include language on financial means to stop land degradation since this will be discussed at the next UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) in September. How can one negotiate and agree on a text with suggestions for policies for sustainability when the themes cannot be discussed in a holistic manner or discussions taking place in other arenas cannot be brought up? Isn't the Commission on Sustainable Development the arena to approach global challenges as poverty, degradation of land and water bodies, ecosystem changes due to climate change, biodiversity loss and migration in an integral and holistic manner?

Where did sustainability in agriculture go?

In the debate about agriculture, according to many parties agriculture should only be about boosting productivity. Any reference to sustainable agriculture was systematically deleted. The idea that agriculture can fulfil many societal functions at the same time, like supporting livelihoods, contributing to food sovereignty, preserving ecosystems and ecosystem services was barely discussed. It is quite shocking that parties in the Commission on Sustainable Development could not

find any agreement on this or a willingness to discuss it. We wonder: if the CSD is not doing it, who will do it?

Where were the Major Groups?

The lack of common language and commitments of the delegations to come with an inspiring but practical text at this CSD is also somewhat reflected in the Major Groups participating in this event. Very few civil society organizations that are involved in sustainable development in general or drought, desertification, Africa, land, agriculture and rural development in particular were present at this CSD cycle. Many CSOs perceive the CSD as a 'talk show' and not as a powerful instrument; however, by not participating in the CSD, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Is there any added value in the final text?

Based on what is said above, can we see any added value in the final chair's text which is the ultimate outcome of CSD17? Well, let's mention some positive elements for the drylands. The UNCCD and its ten year strategic plan are mentioned several times in the final text and support for the implementation of the convention and the strategy is emphasized and thus agreed on by the delegations. Parties agreed to integrate the subject of desertification and land degradation into their policies, strategies for sustainable development and UNCCD National Action Programmes (NAPs) which is often lacking and is one of the reasons why the UNCCD receives little support and is poorly implemented at the national level. Nevertheless, the lack of financial commitments preventing the effective implementation of the UNCCD was still not solved at the CSD. After the full and entire political recognition of the UNCCD framework, could we expect the full and entire support for the ten year strategic plan during COP 9? Logically the answer should be "yes we can"!

The importance of collaboration and coordination between the three Rio conventions was mentioned several times in the chair's text; however, the suggestion of promoting

synergy between the three conventions was surprisingly enough, not accepted. More concrete suggestions should have been made here on how to increase this collaboration and avoid duplication of work. For example, UNFCCC National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) could have been integrated with the UNCCD National Action Programs (NAPs).

The final text gives recognition to the importance of the role of pastoralists in terms of drought mitigation and combating desertification which is significant especially considering that these people are often seen as ‘marginalized’ or worse as the major cause of land degradation. But the importance of pastoralists in terms of sustainable rangeland management and *therefore* their contribution to carbon sequestration and climate

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change mitigation was not included, which is again a failure of providing innovative ways to move forward.

The link between desertification and climate change is clearly mentioned in the chair’s text, but here one should be careful not to overemphasize the role of climate change in desertification at the risk of ignoring other causes of desertification that are not linked

to climate. In addition, combating desertification has been linked to achieving the Millennium Development Goals including poverty reduction. Thus, the text again emphasizes the development character of the UNCCD convention.

What now?

Let’s see now how the national governments will interpret the CSD text into policies and put them into practice on the ground. In addition, as there is very little about the role of Mayor Groups in the Means of Implementation, we are looking forward to see how civil society organizations will be involved (or not) in developing, implementing and monitoring these policies. The lack of reference to civil society organizations in the final text is a very negative sign, not only in terms of the role of these organizations, but it also shows that there is a wrong understanding of the role of key stakeholders who are actually able to implement sustainable development around the world.

Unfortunately, nations will have a short break as migrations, social instability, local wars, trafficking, and an increasing number of poor people in drylands will very soon come back to the front of the international agenda by the increasing vulnerability of the drylands’ inhabitants to the effects of climate change. Like many other issues discussed during the CSDs, sustainable development of dryland areas affected by desertification is not only a technical question, nor a vague general discussion: the question then is what is really the added value of the CSD process among the other global discussions? Should we not reflect on an international framework that is able to aggregate and consolidate, harmonize, and help in the implementation and monitoring of innovative sustainable ideas and approaches instead of adding words to words?

Finally, to the question, should the 2 billion people living in drylands be more hopeful after CSD17?, we have to answer “we don’t know” since CSD did not push towards new sustainable solutions for the situation of the people living in drylands. However, we hope that CSD17 was a preparation for an effective plan of implementation at the Buenos Aires’ UNCCD COP9 in September 2009 and the follow-up for the Kyoto protocol at the Copenhagen UNFCCC COP15 in November 2009 instead of just being a prodigy of disappointing outcomes. ❖

