

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

The UN Commission on Sustainable Development – Another irrelevant UN process?

By Dr. Miquel Muñoz Cabré,
*Boston University's Pardee Center for the
Study of the Longer-range Future*

and Bernd Sommer,
Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)

The Current Column

of 25 May 2010

The UN Commission on Sustainable Development – Another irrelevant UN process?

Bonn, New York City 25 May 2010. The 18th Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) met at UN headquarters in New York during the first two weeks of May. You did not hear of this? Not surprising, since there was no media interest on this meeting. Only a handful of persons, who deal with development or environmental issues professionally, are familiar with the CSD and its proceedings. Therefore, we address this year's CSD meeting on a rather basic level and answer some simple questions: What is the Commission on Sustainable Development? What did it do in those two weeks? Why has it not been featured in the media? And where is the CSD going?

The Commission on Sustainable Development was created in 1992. That year's summer saw the landmark Rio Earth Summit, which resulted, among others, in the Rio Declaration, the Rio Conventions (on climate change, biodiversity and desertification), Agenda 21, and a calling for CSD's creation. Later that year, the UN General Assembly established the Commission on Sustainable Development, with the objectives to ensure the follow-up of the Earth Summit and the implementation of Agenda 21 at the local, national and international levels. The Commission has met annually during eighteen years (hence the 18th), which brings us to 2010.

This year the Commission was to review four topics: mining, transport, chemicals, and sustainable consumption and production. Of the four topics, sustainable consumption and production is the most relevant for long term sustainable development, since it addresses the interaction between economic systems, environment and values. During the deliberations, much time was spent on the review of the so-called Marrakech Process, a 10-year UN framework of SCP programmes. However, the topics clustered under sustainable consumption and production were so far-reaching, ranging from change in lifestyles and consumption patterns to sustainable water management and over-

all development goals, that discussions were not very productive. In other words, everything and nothing was discussed under the umbrella of SCP. Only concerning one point discussions converged: labelling programmes. While the "North" described environmental and sustainability quality labels as an effective means to support the introduction of sustainable consumption and production patterns, some in the "South" cautioned against the danger of "green protectionism".

Even though the official agenda had only four topics, the meeting nonetheless addressed other issues. Climate change, for example, pervaded many discussions, particularly those on transport or SCP, where climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts were frequently noted. Additionally, the CSD was up-dated on the outcome of the latest climate meetings: Karsten Sach, Director at the German Federal Ministry for the Environment and Claude Heller Rouassant, Mexico's UN Ambassador briefed delegates on the "Petersberg Climate Dialogue", which took place in early May near Bonn; Evo Morales, President of Bolivia, presented the outcomes from the Cochabamba World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.

This brings us to our question: why is the Commission on Sustainable Development not in the media? Climate change is part of the answer. By being successfully mainstreamed (UN-speak to mean it actually grabbed the attention of decision-makers), climate change has had the unintended effect of crowding out all other environmental and sustainable development issues. CSD inherited its status from the successful Rio Earth Summit and maintained it through the inconclusive 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (held in Johannesburg), but the Commission has been diminishing in political stature and level of ambition since then. In particular, with hindsight, the two-year implementation cycles preset for 14 (!) years deprive CSD of much the needed flexi-

bility to remain current and relevant. Another factor contributing to CSD's decline stems from its nature; the Commission is about soft power, establishing guidance rather than rules. This can be an asset, but its inability to reach conclusions, particularly on energy and climate change at CSD 15 in 2007, has turned CSD's soft power into a liability. To many, including us and the many missing ministers, CSD's relevance is now into question. So it is understandable that the media did not cover the event.

So where to go from here? CSD 18 met in a temporary building, while the emblematic UN building gets refurbished. The analogy could not be better. The Commission on Sustainable Development needs to be revamped or it will fade into oblivion. The opportunity to come back to the forefront will be given by the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, to be celebrated in Rio, also known as Rio+20, in reference to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Rio+20's topics include the fashionable "green economy", but also the

reform of the institutional framework for sustainable development. Apart from efforts to strengthen environmental governance in the course of this reform, there are also voices advocating for an upgrade of the CSD. Accordingly, Rio+20 will be decisive for CSD's destiny, to whether it is re-equipped with real significance, or continues to become meaningless – as so many UN processes have before.

Dr. Miquel Muñoz Cabré, Postdoctoral Fellow at Boston University's Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-range Future

Bernd Sommer, Researcher at *Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)* and Research Analyst at German Advisory Council on Global Change (*Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen - WBGU*)