Following the Rio Summit

UNITED NATIONS TAKES DECISIVE ACTION FOR DEPARTMENTAL RESTRUCTURING AND FOLLOW-UP OF RIO SUMMIT RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALSO TO CONVENE HABITAT II IN 1996

By Eric Carlson

Before concluding its Forty-seventh session in December the United Nations gave approval to a sweeping body of proposals for the restructuring and revitalization of UN activities in the economic, social and related fields. It endorsed the establishment of three new UN departments, including a Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development to follow-up the recommendations of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). This Department will support a new UN Commission on Sustainable Development with 53 member States, aided by a 24 member High Level Advisory Board.

In a lengthy resolution, the UNGA also decided to convene the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) from 3 to 14 June 1996, at the highest possible level of participation. The conference will have a preparatory committee open to all States Members of the United Nations and of the specialized agencies. An organizational session will be held at UN Headquarters in March 1993, and the conference itself will be held in Turkey.

In addition to these actions, the UNGA decided to convene a world summit for social development at the level of heads of State and/or Government to be held in early 1995 in Denmark. The core issues of the Summit will be: (i) The enhancement of social integration, particularly of the more disadvantaged and marginalized groups; (ii) The alleviation and reduction of poverty; and (iii) The expansion of productive employment.

In April 1994 there will also be held the first Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. Another important event is the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in China in 1995. The social development, small island and women’s conferences will fall under the direction of the new Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. The ad-hoc secretariat for the Habitat Conference is to be organizationally part of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) in Nairobi. The establishment of the three new Departments in New York at UN headquarters are part of an on-going process of restructuring undertaken by the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. It is part of an integrated approach to development, which can only be promoted through a stronger United Nations. The Secretary General has identified (these clusters) of functions under a new managerial approach which is designed to integrate all economic, social and environmental entities in a coherent structure to effectively mobilize the UN’s analytical, normative and operational capacities in support of common objectives and strategies. Implicit in this approach also is strengthening the UN Economic and Social Council.

The Secretary General has given high priority in this respect to the new Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. This will be headed by Nitin Desai of India, who served as deputy to Maurice Strong, who served as Secretary General of the monumental Rio Summit undertaken in June. The Department will have extraordinary support functions to the Secretary General, for overall coordination of the UN system in the economic and social fields, and also for the provision of policy guidance to operational program and field offices. The Department will be the “clearly identifiable entity” for monitoring the implementation of Agenda 21 and for providing substantive support for the Commission on Sustainable Development as to the Economic and Social Council for designated aspects.

The Department will support and draw on the high-level advisory board of 24 eminent persons attached to the Commission on Sustainable Development. It will also provide secretariat support to relevant parts of the inter-agency coordination machinery, including the new Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development. Most of the work of the Department will be carried on

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from UN Headquarters in New York. The Department will establish cooperative relationships with non-governmental organizations, the academic community and the corporate sectors.

The second Department to be established carries the name, “Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis.” It is headed by Jean-Claude Milleron of France. The Department will function as a service for the provision of statistical support to all parts of the Organization, and will cooperate with the Bretton Woods Institutions and other relevant agencies.

The third Department for “Development Support and Management Services” is headed by Ji Chaozhu of China. It will serve as a focal point for the provision of management services for technical cooperation and also act as an executing agency in selected cross-sectional areas. It will give emphasis to the twin concepts of institutional development (including institution-building, institutional reform and enterprise management) and human resources development (including activities aimed at human capital formation and at enhancing the contribution of different social groups to development). Technical cooperation is to be focussed on the requirements of the least developed countries, as well as those of economies in transition.

The three new Headquarters Departments will be headed at the Under-Secretary level. There are many challenges which lie ahead for this new clustering of Headquarters Activities. There will be some elements of continuity but also many innovative features regarding existing and previous structures. The three new departments will include functions now currently under the responsibility of the Department of Economic and Social Development and a number of other units. There will be questions of redeployment of a number of high-level posts, where certain activities will need to be reallocated, and how managerial efforts will help improve linkages between global, regional and national strategies for development, including closer cooperation between Headquarters and the United Nations field offices.

Nothing has yet been clearly stated regarding the future status of the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), both located in Nairobi. Although the Department will have a predominant single location, there will be functional links with staff located in Geneva, particularly for follow-up of legal instruments, on issues such as climate change and desertification. There will be arrangements for liaison with European-based agencies, and the Department will establish cooperative arrangements with both UNEP and UNCHS (Habitat).

Important personnel changes are also taking place. Perhaps the most notable recent appointment was Elizabeth Dowdeswell of Canada for the post of Executive Director of UNEP, to replace Mustafa Tolba who has been director since 1974 when he took over from Maurice Strong, the first UNEP director. Gertrude Monge of Tanzania has been appointed Secretary General for the Fourth World Women’s Conference to be held in Beijing. Other new appointments are expected.

As for the UNGA resolution to convene a second conference on Habitat, to be held after the Habitat Conference in Vancouver, there are questions as to how this will be implemented, received and acted upon in various countries. The Habitat Conference was by no means as successful as its predecessor, the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment of 1972. Very few of the original objectives of the Conference were achieved and its recommendations have not been adopted by many countries.

There is no meaningful constituency for this Global Strategy, and it seems evident that there should be major reforms of the concepts and techniques that have been applied to date if there is to be much progress for shelter and infrastructure improvement. Yet, the resolution establishing Habitat II reads as though it were written several decades ago. The objectives are to “arrest the deterioration of global human settlement conditions”, to adopt a general statement of principles and commitments and formulate a related global plan of action, and “review trends in policies and programmes undertaken by countries and international organizations...” etc.

Of course, a Preparatory Committee will be established, open to all States Members of the United Nations and of the specialized agencies. The organizational session of this Preparatory Committee will be held at UN Headquarters in March 1993; there will be a substantive Preparatory Committee session in early 1994 in Geneva or New York, and another in 1995 in conjunction with the session of the Commission on Human Settlements. NGO’s are invited, particularly those from developing countries, to participate in and contribute to the Conference. An ad hoc secretariat for the Conference headed by a Secretary General is to be appointed by the Secretary General of the UN.

There will be regional and sub-regional meetings, and all organs of the UN system are requested to cooperate with the Secretariat of the Conference. Insofar as possible
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in matters of succession or at the moment of declaration to the solidarity tax on wealth (ISF). There is simply no doubt that the offer of such services contributes efficiently to the faithfulness of diverse groups of clients.

Thus, if specialized companies are pushed towards a certain diversification of their offer, by the uncertainty of markets, by the evolution of demand, by the stiffening of competition, this diversification should obey certain rules. Among these, the permanent reference to the original function, to the know-how which characterizes it, to the understanding of the clientele that it implies, appears to be the most important. It is from the original function that the "logic" of diversification should develop. To forget this elementary rule would risk arriving at dangerous decisions, which could generate severe disillusionment.

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the Secretariat will be established through redeployment within existing resources. The preparatory process and the Conference itself are to be funded through existing UN budgetary resources, and through voluntary contributions to a trust fund established specifically for the Conference. A separate voluntary fund will be established for the purpose of supporting the participation of developing countries in the conference and its preparatory process. Any cost-benefit analysis of the resources to be used for the Conference over the next three years will therefore be difficult. More productive options for the use of such resources remain to be explored.

While the new UNGA Resolution to convene a Habitat II reflects no new concepts or ideas that have not been previously expressed in UN resolutions of the past, it does recognize that "human settlements" did emerge from the Rio Conference as a sector much in need of funding and development. The Agenda 21 plan of action from the Rio Conference does contain a laundry-list chapter outline of eight major programs to be financed in part through investments of the countries themselves but with significant international essential additives. To some extent, the Habitat II will need to address with realism the inadequate programs of the Agenda 21 Chapter. But this is a task also for the existing Commission on Human Settlements which will meet next in Nairobi in April 1993. The Commission should give special emphasis to the subject of mobilizing household savings and the relationship of housing finance programs and sustainable development for all sectors of the population. Perhaps in this way it can provoke discussion of existing UN instruments such as the Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation presently operating under Habitat and whether or not it is fulfilling the mission defined by the UNGA resolution of twenty years ago.

UN resolutions, conferences and plans of action will undoubtedly continue to proliferate through the present decade. But it is important for all concerned with the emerging new world order that the verbiage and phraseology of these international events be based on real scenarios from which will emerge strong constituencies and visible action on the ground to meet the expressed needs. "Global Strategies" may too easily become elaborate charades or masking the lack of will or interest on the part of governments and others to face up to the urgent requirements to mobilize and to help people help themselves when it comes to shelter and improvement of community environment.