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Major groups***Report of the Secretary-General****Contents**

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* This report was prepared by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat as task manager for chapters 24-32 of Agenda 21, with contributions from United Nations agencies, international organizations and major groups. The report is a brief factual overview, which is intended to inform the Commission on Sustainable Development on key developments in the subject area.



I. Introduction

1. This report reviews main accomplishments and constraints related to the participation of major groups in sustainable development. The progress made by the specific major groups identified in Agenda 21¹ is covered in reports prepared by the groups themselves for the planned multi-stakeholder dialogues for the World Summit on Sustainable Development preparatory process. Two additional background papers will supplement the present report: an analytic review of the multi-stakeholder dialogue segments of the Commission on Sustainable Development, conducted by the Consensus Building Institute/Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat; the second worldwide survey of local Agenda 21 initiatives conducted by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), Capacity 21/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Department.

2. When it adopted Agenda 21, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development introduced the major groups concept, by which the global community acknowledged that achieving sustainable development would require broad-based participation and partnerships with non-governmental actors.² To facilitate such participation, Agenda 21 linked the nine major groups, with specific roles and responsibilities in the follow-up process, and described the type of support and collaboration they could legitimately expect from Governments and intergovernmental organizations.

3. The two main elements of the major groups concept are participation in decision-making, and new forms of participation. The first refers to the active presence of major groups in the design, execution, and monitoring of sustainable development follow-up activities at all levels, going beyond the passive exchange of information. Such active participation would create the basis for transparency and accountability necessary in sustainable development efforts. The second demands a continuous search for optimal mechanisms of engagement which are meaningful, influence outcomes and generate partnership. Creating such mechanisms will require changes in the way economic, social, environmental, and political debate and discourse takes place.

II. Main accomplishments

4. During the first 10 years of follow-up to the Conference, many governmental, non-governmental and intergovernmental institutions have successfully experimented with new forms of participation and with participation in decision-making at the international, regional, national and local levels.

5. At the international level, positive trends include further recognition of major groups as genuine partners, developments in formalizing partnerships with various major group actors by the United Nations and non-United Nations international organizations, the new participatory practices created by the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the dissemination of those new practices within the United Nations system.

6. Major United Nations conferences following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development further recognized that stakeholders are crucial partners in the pursuit of global objectives.³ In some, this recognition took a more tangible form within the conference proceedings. For example, at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States held in 1994, non-governmental actors played an active role in the drafting of the final outcome. Similarly, Habitat II, in 1996, formally recognized the private sector, local communities and local authorities as key partners for the work on the human settlements agenda.

7. This growing recognition of participation and partnership has led a number of United Nations organizations to formalize, codify, and clarify the framework of their collaboration with various major groups. For example, during the past 10 years, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), among others, have developed guidelines, codes and other strategic documents to better define and systematize their engagement with non-governmental organizations and other major groups. Similar efforts have also been made by regional banks, such as the Asian Development Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and by regional political institutions, such as the Organization of American States.

8. Similarly, the World Bank has deepened its engagement with a range of non-governmental

organizations working on environment, development, human rights, social development and health issues. The World Trade Organization (WTO), especially after serious criticism by a range of civil society groups, including non-governmental organizations, trade unions and religious groups, has been showing signs of opening up to consultations with civil society representatives. A broad range of stakeholders has been actively involved in the various Conventions on climate change, biological diversity and desertification. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has initiated informal consultation processes with non-governmental organizations, to complement its formal consultative process with business and trade unions. Institutional changes, such as the creation of non-governmental organization or civil society focal points or units, often supplement those efforts in a tangible way and with a long-term focus.

9. In the context of new participatory practices, the Commission on Sustainable Development has been a “pathfinder”, building on participatory experiments at the national and local levels.⁴ The Commission’s multi-stakeholder dialogue segments, launched at the sixth session in 1998, have provided opportunities for major groups and Governments to share views, experiences, and concerns, and to generate shared commitments.⁵ A particular strength of the dialogue segments has been their clear substantive focus on an economic sector (such as tourism, agriculture, or energy) linked with the agenda of the annual session of the Commission. Feedback from Governments and major groups indicate that the segments have made the Commission a more accessible, open and transparent intergovernmental process, relative to all other similar bodies.

10. Requests made by the Commission and the growing recognition of the dialogue segments as an innovative mechanism led other United Nations organizations to explore ways to incorporate multi-stakeholder processes in their work. Examples of such efforts include a multi-stakeholder process to review voluntary initiatives launched by the Commission in 1998 and currently led by UNEP; a multi-stakeholder working group on tourism, created in 1999 and jointly led by the World Tourism Organization, UNEP, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, major groups and Governments; and a multi-stakeholder dialogue in the Committee on Agriculture of FAO early in 2001.

11. At the national and local levels, the national councils of sustainable development and the local Agenda 21 initiatives have been successful incubators and generators of new participatory practices. The councils, which exist in 70 countries, as coordination mechanisms, have provided opportunities to build consensus on national priorities and helped to create a broad-based sense of ownership of sustainable development work at the national level. They have also opened avenues for major group participation in decision-making at the national level.

12. The rapidly expanding numbers of local Agenda 21 initiatives continue to serve as successful models of public participation in cities, towns and local communities. (The first worldwide survey of the initiatives, conducted in 1996 by ICLEI and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs revealed a total of 1,812 initiatives in 64 countries.⁶) A specific requirement of the initiatives is multi-stakeholder engagements and processes. As a result most initiatives have emerged out of a participatory process, involving a cross-section of local community and business leaders.

13. These trends are likely to continue, given the positive feedback from the stakeholders involved and the analyses of their experiences so far. Numerous case studies conducted over the past decade have demonstrated that when a broad range of stakeholder groups are actively involved in programme design, implementation and monitoring and are accountable to each other on decisions or activities they undertake, the results are more sustained than would otherwise be the case. Participation generates shared values, mutually reinforced commitments, and joint ownership, which, in turn, effectively breaks the traditional pattern dividing stakeholders into “recipients” and “providers”.

14. Within the community of major groups at large, positive trends include emerging partnerships between major groups (in particular, between civil society and the private sector), changes in the approach of business and industry to sustainable development, the rapid growth in the non-governmental sector, and additional responsibilities being assumed.

15. Prior to the Earth Summit, it was largely assumed that partnerships between certain major groups, particularly between non-governmental organizations and business and industry, would be unlikely. This assumption has been revised. Partnerships involving

individual companies and non-governmental organizations have generated normative frameworks, in the form of voluntary initiatives and guidelines for responsible business practices or practical results through programmes aiming for more efficiency in resource use. The Global Compact initiative, launched by the United Nations in 1999, has brought a degree of “universality” to these efforts, by setting the stage for potential partnerships between the United Nations, the business community, and the international labour and civil society organizations. The Compact asks corporations to adopt, in their global operations, good practices, identified by the broader international community, in the areas of human rights, labour standards and the environment.

16. These partnerships and initiatives have led to both positive and negative reactions from major groups at large. For example, while a number of non-governmental organizations and other major groups actively support the Global Compact, there are those that are critical of its lack of transparency in the initial design phase or lack of an accountability framework to monitor its implementation phase. There is continuing disagreement in the greater community of non-governmental organizations on the extent to which they should engage in partnership with businesses. A similar disagreement exists within the greater business community. These differing views signal the need for continued debate, dialogue and exploration of possibilities, involving all concerned parties, to identify and develop the “optimal” mechanisms for participation, partnership and consensus-building in sustainable development. Accountability and transparency are likely to be key issues in that debate.

17. The number of actors in the non-governmental sector has been on the rise, particularly during the past decade. The actors are better networked, in focused and targeted ways, based on common objectives that transcend national or geographical boundaries. Access to electronic information networks has been a significant factor in their strength. The non-governmental networks are generating new pressure points in the global sustainable development process by enabling strong positions to be developed and disseminated more rapidly and effectively than was possible only 10 years ago.

18. Although a full mapping and analysis of the non-governmental sector in sustainable development — or in other global programmes — has not been carried

out, there is evidence that non-governmental organizations and others in this sector increasingly provide public goods and services in the social and environmental fields, particularly at the national and regional levels. Many non-governmental organizations are programme delivery agents for various bilaterally or multilaterally funded national or local projects, often working in partnership with national Governments. Various businesses also provide public services, due in part to privatization and market liberalization programmes. These “new” areas of service, provided by non-governmental and private sector entities, are signalling possible changes in the way state and society relate to and work with each other. What these changes might mean for governance in relation to sustainable development and how they might be channelled to further benefit sustainability objectives need to be further explored.

III. Main constraints

19. Major group participation in sustainable development continues to face numerous constraints. Among them are geographical imbalances in participation, particularly at the international level, growing dependence on mainstream major groups as intermediaries, the need for further work on setting accountable and transparent participation mechanisms, lack of meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and lack of reliable funding for major groups.

20. Despite efforts to support and increase participation by major groups from developing countries and from countries with economies in transition, the majority of stakeholder participants in intergovernmental processes, including the Commission, continue to be from developed countries. Funding is an important factor — but not the only factor — for this “geographical divide”. The institutional and substantive capacities of major groups from the “south” to participate effectively are equally important and need urgent attention. Empowerment and capacity-building efforts at the national and regional levels may be a step towards closing the “geographical divide”.

21. A closely related problem is overdependence on the representatives of major groups that are well acquainted with the workings of governmental and intergovernmental machinery and that often act as

intermediaries for those not so well acquainted. This effectively leaves many local and national voices unheard or heard only through the intermediaries. As a result, the full diversity of views and visions is not brought into the discourse on sustainable development. Exploring and creating incentives that encourage the more mainstream stakeholder organizations to mobilize new non-governmental leadership and to revitalize their links with the grass roots may reduce this dependence.

22. There continue to be gaps in accountability, despite much discussion of the problem. In many cases, the civil society and business actors that demand accountability from Governments do not always offer the same accountability from within. In light of the demands of major groups to take part in decision-making processes and be genuine partners in sustainable development, there needs to be further work on and commitment to mechanisms of mutual accountability which apply equally to all actors.

23. The participation of major groups over the past 10 years has been largely ad hoc, lacking clear and formalized mechanisms for their full engagement in making decisions and implementing them. This constraint particularly affects the local and national major groups that feel marginalized, in terms of sustainability issues, in their communities and countries. Similarly, at the international level major group participation is still largely limited to a passive exchange of information. Sustainable development processes at all levels need to expand the available participation mechanisms so as to allow more meaningful contributions from major groups, including their participation in making decisions that affect their communities.

24. Except for those funded through membership fees or private contributions, most major groups depend on bilateral and multilateral institutions to fund their work. This leads non-governmental organizations and other major groups to design projects that respond to donor priorities rather than to their own priorities and needs. Repeated studies in recent years have highlighted the need for donors to take a more strategic and long-term view of funding support for civil society actors, particularly highlighting their capacity- and institution-building needs.

IV. Issues for further consideration

25. The future growth and success of major groups in sustainable development require sound mechanisms of consultation, dialogue, partnership and access to the decision-making processes. These mechanisms are likely to work better and generate genuine results in the long term if they emphasize mutual accountability and transparency among all parties involved.

26. Multi-stakeholder dialogues and processes should be closely linked to decision-making processes, with a focus on reconciling the conflicting interests of participating constituencies as they define and implement strategies and programmes for sustainable development. A particular area to explore is how the Commission's multi-stakeholder dialogues can be further enhanced. Several possibilities might be considered. For example, the dialogues could be used as a forum that enhances the partnerships needed in the development, implementation and monitoring of thematic international work programmes. This is likely to increase the level of commitment and partnerships under the work programmes. Multi-stakeholder processes could also be considered as possible mechanisms to review more effectively the implementation of actions that the various parties have already agreed to undertake.

27. A concerted effort to disseminate multi-stakeholder processes at the regional and national level is needed. In this context, the adoption of major groups as the basis for participation by international and regional organizations may be useful.

28. Given the growing interest and engagement of the United Nations system with various stakeholders, it may be necessary to explore inter-agency mechanisms that specifically focus on coordinating and strengthening the United Nations work with major groups in the area of sustainable development.

29. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 55/199, preparations for the Summit in 2002 should, inter alia, address ways of strengthening the institutional framework for sustainable development. Specific suggestions in this regard would be included in documentation prepared for subsequent meetings of the Commission at its tenth session, acting as the preparatory committee for the Summit. One of the many challenges in this area is to find ways of enhancing meaningful and practical involvement of

major groups in sustainable development governance structures at various levels, both national and international. Another is generating new participatory mechanisms aimed at implementation of national, regional and international programmes of action in the area of sustainable development. It would be important to build on the lessons learned since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, including those in the Commission, by further promoting such elements as multi-stakeholder involvement in policy formulation and multidisciplinary focus on issues integrating social, economic and environmental aspects; and by supporting participatory mechanisms in which all of the parties involved are committed to transparency and mutual accountability and responsibility.

⁶ A second worldwide survey is currently under way as a joint project of ICLEI, Capacity 21/UNDP and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The results will be available in December 2001.

Notes

¹ See *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8), vol. I, resolution 1, annex II. The groups are women, children and youth, indigenous people, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, scientific and technological communities and farmers.

² *Ibid.*, para. 23.1.

³ The Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, the International Conference on Population and Development, the Fourth World Conference on Women, the World Summit for Social Development, and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II).

⁴ The original idea of multi-stakeholder processes first appeared from within the local Agenda 21 process, which emphasized involvement of a cross-section of local stakeholders with the local authorities. At the national level a similar set of experiences emerged from the national councils for sustainable development. The contribution of the Commission was to bring the local and national experiences to the international level, by embracing multi-stakeholder dialogues as part of its annual programme of work.

⁵ Further information on the lessons learned will be available in December 2001, in a background paper currently being prepared by the Consensus Building Institute/MIT and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.