

## “Partnerships” that Raise More Questions than Answers

by Saradha Ramaswamy Iyer

*The World Summit on Sustainable Development's (WSSD's) Type II partnerships were supposed to complement the implementation of internationally agreed commitments. But they have yet to live up to their hype. The new criteria and guidelines for their operation need much more time to settle in place. The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) is only beginning to come to grips with its new role in this area. The UN system and its agencies continue to show strong commitment to partnership. However, the business sector seems to be having second thoughts while other stakeholders remain skeptical. More significantly, there has been no corresponding commitment of resources to see the announced initiatives through.*

### 1. Introduction

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was not supposed to re-negotiate the road map for sustainability drawn up by the Rio Summit in 1992. Instead the hope was that it would take account of emerging trends, integrate fully the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development and strengthen the implementation of Agenda 21 and WSSD outcomes.

The biggest challenge for the WSSD was to find concrete, practical and meaningful ways to address this problem, in open official acknowledgement that there is a crisis of implementation of the Rio outcomes. In assessing and reviewing the Rio Summit it was clear that specific commitments were not followed up with resource allocations and implementation actions. There was simply no political will.

Furthermore, in the run-up to the WSSD, there was widespread recognition that governments by themselves cannot deliver implementation and therefore Johannesburg should play a role in catalysing strong partnerships between governments and other actors such as civil society groups, businesses and inter-governmental organisations.

### 2. Two types of outcomes

Based on the above reasoning and early in the preparatory process, it was determined by the Secretariat that there would be two types of outcomes from the WSSD, Type I and Type II.

Type I outcomes are the documents negotiated by UN Member States. These now include the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and the Plan of Implementation of the WSSD.

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Type II outcomes, on the other hand, are the voluntary commitments to specific targets or objectives for the implementation of sustainable development made by individual governments, non-governmental actors or by partnerships of governmental and/or non-governmental actors. Type IIs were not negotiated in the formal WSSD preparatory process and do not require consensus agreement between all UN Member States.

From the beginning many civil society groups, including NGOs, indigenous peoples, women's organisations and trade unions, questioned the move to give official blessing to Type II partnerships at a Summit level, especially when it became clear that a major goal was to get big business on board.

There was no framework or rules to evaluate and monitor Type IIs. At the same time, the last 10 years have proven that self-regulation and voluntary codes of conduct have failed to ensure good corporate governance and behaviour. Moreover, since the private sector has more resources and thus influence and power, any 'partnership' would inherently be an unequal one. Given that the sustainable development record of business belies its rhetoric in most cases, Type IIs could be a Pandora's Box.

Thus, while cooperation and alliances for sustainable development among different actors, government and non-government, are abundant and can be successful, Type IIs introduce the element of endorsement without accountability.

There were fears that such a development would further undermine weakening inter-governmental commitments. In the WSSD context, the US for example was openly favouring Type II above Type I, and strongly promoted that the UN Commission on Sustainable Development refocus its work on Type IIs.

### 3. Type IIs at the WSSD

At the end of PrepCom II in New York in January-February 2002, the Secretariat first compiled and published a paper entitled 'Proposals for Partnerships/Initiatives to strengthen the implementation of Agenda 21' and suggested that interested parties identify partners and specify clear targets, time-tables, monitoring arrangements, coordination and implementation mechanisms, and arrangements for systematic and predictable funding and for technology transfer.

Later, an explanatory note from the Chairman of the WSSD Preparatory Committee, Emil Salim of Indonesia, gave further details saying that only partnerships/initiatives that are international in scope and reach (i.e., global, regional or sub-regional) and those aimed at supporting practical implementation of Agenda 21 and sustainable development activities in developing countries, in particular the least developing countries and small island developing States, as well as countries with economies in transition, would be eligible for announcement during the official partnership events at the Summit. Only those partnerships that are new and are developed specifically in the context of the WSSD and its goals would feature at the official events.

During informal meetings held during PrepCom III many questions were raised about the exact scope and modalities of Type IIs and their relationship to Type Is. In response to the concerns raised by non-governmental organisations and a few delegations a 'Vice-Chairs' Summary of the Informal Meetings on Partnerships/Initiatives' was released in April 2002. This paper clarified the following:

- Partnerships are not intended to substitute the strong commitments by governments in Type I outcomes, rather they should contribute to translating those political commitments into action.
- Partnerships are of a voluntary self-organising nature with parameters for their organisation to remain as flexible and simple as possible.

### 4. The Debate

The issue of partnerships became a hotly debated item on the WSSD's agenda. Various views were expressed in the course of the preparatory process and at the Summit itself.

The UN through its Special Envoy Jan Pronk suggested that not everything needs to be negotiated or implemented at the global level. He proposed that only willing participants united by shared goals should form consultative groups on sectors without the political constraints of requiring full consensus.

The US, one of the biggest proponents, highlighted the potential role of the Commission on Sustainable Development in evaluating and replicating partnerships, identifying lessons learned and facilitating more partnerships. The EU insisted there be a clear link to sustainable

development objectives and that ownerships be among all partners. Other governments called for simple clear guidelines, flexible criteria and clarification on funding for partnerships. The G77 at that point was afraid the partnership issue would dominate the debate to the detriment of the inter-governmental process and preferred a wait-and-see attitude.

The UNDP outlined five principles for building effective partnerships namely trust, transparency and access to information, shared responsibility, goal-oriented result-driven objectives and the need to reflect local priorities and help create an enabling environment for effective action. UNEP emphasised the need for monitoring and evaluating partnerships.

Many NGOs recognised that the notion was not new and that there were already many examples of successful partnerships at the local, national, regional and even global levels. While showing a great deal of interest in partnerships for implementation, they cautioned that partnerships should not replace government obligations, that they should in fact complement and supplement the fulfilment of governmental commitments. Some groups stressed the need for wide stakeholder participation, accountability, transparency and respect between partners for each other's differences. The strongest NGO critics were those who did not want to see Type II partnerships institutionalised and legitimised by the UN especially where the private sector (especially transnational business) is involved. The credibility of the UN would be threatened, at a time when multilateralism is under siege.

The private/business sector strongly supported the partnership initiatives calling for actions that deliver results rather than emphasising mere procedures. Businesses, it was said, are constantly seeking tangible result-oriented measurable goals and should therefore be encouraged to join in to ensure practical implementation within a free market framework employing market-based approaches.

At the WSSD itself, a total of seven thematic partnership plenaries took place during the first week of the Summit to address the five priority issues identified by the UN Secretary-General (water and sanitation, energy, health and environment, agriculture, and biodiversity and eco-system management - WEHAB) as well as cross-sectoral issues and regional implementation.

Relevant UN agencies had prepared Framework Papers to facilitate discussion, provide focus and catalyse action in the WEHAB areas. There were presentations by experts and commentaries by panels of resource persons followed by comments from delegates. The general feeling among attendees was that these discussions were substantive, well moderated and useful. Summaries of these sessions have now been adopted by the meeting's main committee and are posted on the UN website. However, there was frustration that these discussions occurred as a parallel process with the inter-governmental negotiations and thus have little or no impact on the Type I outcome which is supposed to be the substantive framework for Type IIs.

It is interesting that the discussions threw up many areas of actions that are needed by national governments and international institutions, especially the inter-governmental ones. It reinforced the reality that many gaps left by governments cannot be substituted by Type IIs.

### Partnerships to Tackle Poverty and Environmental Problems: A Critique

During the Summit process itself about 200 partnerships were launched. Following the Summit, the UN in its 'Highlight of Commitments and Implementation Initiatives of the WSSD' enumerated a total of 118 partnerships in the five WEHAB areas alone. The resources/investments announced to support these areas amounted to approximately US\$4.4 billion, with the US alone pledging US\$3.4 billion.

At its 11th Session in May 2003, the CSD, reaffirmed the commitment to partnerships. However, in the face of continued skepticism from NGOs and some governments, it agreed to a set of criteria and guidelines for partnerships within the WSSD context and in accordance with the Bali Guiding Principles. It stated that 264 partnerships posted before CSD 11 had been checked against the Bali Guiding Principles but that partnerships submitted after CSD 11 will be checked against the new criteria and guidelines.

The CSD website < [www.un.org/esa/sustdev/partnerships](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/partnerships) > as of 29 April 2003 posts 266 partnerships activities and processes. Of these 60% are global in nature, 40% have regional focus; two-thirds have funding, USD\$120 million is still being sought. Partners involved are mostly

governments, intergovernmental organizations with the UN agencies making up close to 25% and major groups. Contrary to expectation, only a small proportion of partnerships are led by the private sector though 94 partnerships are found on the Business Action for Sustainable Development website.

Public-private partnerships seem pragmatic, constructive and cooperative and are very appealing at this stage in which heightened efforts are being made to ensure action and implementation to bring about real change. But this could also spell out a pre-packaged exit strategy for government involvement particularly in the area of provision of public services like water, energy, health and education. This is why it is important to critically reflect on the implications of such initiatives.

This emphasis on partnerships also raises many concerns about the future of diplomacy and global cooperation to resolve global issues through global governance. Is it a tacit admission that governments and the international community are not able to tackle the problems of global poverty and environmental decay? Does this trend risk placing our future in the hands of profit-driven global corporations? Will this take place despite the spate of corporate scandals that have rocked the globe and exposed the myth of the free market and self-regulation? Where will we seek recourse if things go dreadfully wrong?

However well intentioned, voluntary ad hoc partnerships of the willing by themselves can neither be expected to set the framework for nor mobilise the resources to deliver true progress on sustainable development on the scale that is needed. The UN itself may be construed as conferring legitimacy on partnerships without a clear transparent and accountable framework in place. One major worry is that this whole process may sound the death knell for multilateralism and signal the beginning of the wholesale corporatisation of the UN. An overwhelming number of fragmented partnerships may lead to the establishment of alternative or parallel

mechanisms instead of enhancing democracy in public institutions. There is a further need to re-evaluate the role of public interest organisations in this pro-partnership era. NGOs who cooperate with the private sector for instance may risk compromising their independence and become unable to speak out against their 'partners' in sustainable development. Partnerships may further grease the door for business-government collaboration leading to smoother 'revolving door' politics and even less accountability. Other fundamental questions remain. Who chooses the partners and why? Will the trend serve to build or split alliances? Will those choosing not to enter into partnerships suffer rejection, and be labelled as uncooperative or confrontational?

The aim of the WSSD was to lift two billion people out of poverty and help protect the environment for future generations. Despite being dubbed the Implementation Summit of the new millennium more time was spent negotiating the letter of the Plan (with attempts to even regress from prior commitments) rather than on actual ways to implement it with human resources, energy and adequate financial resources. The nature and conduct of the discussions on partnerships has drawn attention to their possible consequences, both positive but largely negative, without any real attempt to address key issues surrounding the notion itself. Their effects on the Summit's goals cannot be fully measured in the immediate aftermath of the Summit. Their impact on the international process and at local, national and regional levels will only become evident when reviews are carried out of their progress by the Commission on Sustainable Development. As the old adage goes, only time will tell. And it can only be hoped it tells a story with a happy ending.

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