

Recap of UN Special Session on international development

by Jacques S. Roy

The 11th Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly held August 25 to September 15, 1980 had two objectives: (a) launch the global negotiations and (b) adopt the International Development Strategy for the third United Nations Development Decade. It failed in its first objective because the negotiations were not launched and did not quite meet the second as consensus agreement on the text of the strategy was reached but its adoption was deferred. Thus, another important attempt to make some progress in the North-South Dialogue would seem to have been a failure more than a success. However, bearing in mind that a new international economic order can only take shape gradually, the 11th Special Session cannot be assessed only on the basis of results achieved during the meetings but on its contribution to the long term process. In that context, the session helped clear the air on some important issues.

The points of contention during the discussions on the global negotiations and the international development strategy were quite different; so were the methods of negotiating. We will pass them in review, consider the role of the participants and draw some conclusions.

Over the years, the North-South dialogue has been conducted in a large number of places but the main focus has been the United Nations in New York. A particular system of procedures has developed there which is different from that used, for instance, at the United Nations in Geneva or at financial institutions such as the World Bank. In addition, most if not all debates at the UN in New York are extremely politicized and, for instance, it is difficult to have discussions on economic subjects on the basis of economic arguments: generally the political aspects take precedence.

To avoid these constraints and in a search for more efficient ways of proceeding, different formulas have

been attempted: e.g. the Conference on International Economic Co-operation in Paris, the 'Manley' Summit in Jamaica. The departures from the traditional way of doing things are resented by most of the developing countries because (a) few are invited to take part and (b) they cannot maintain the political pressure applied in New York. As a result, the New York UN forum remains the favourite one for the great majority of the developing countries.

This preference for the New York UN forum became the main issue in the discussions for the launching of the global negotiations. From the outset, the Group of 77 (underdeveloped countries) focussed its attention on the procedures for the negotiations and tried to ensure that the New York UN forum would have an all-embracing role allowing it to indicate to specialized institutions such as the World Bank, what results were expected from them. Most Western countries were prepared to give a wide mandate to the UN in New York one that would enable it to have supervisory responsibilities on the whole negotiating process but would nevertheless preserve the mandates of the specialized institutions. This was not enough to meet the requirements of the developing countries and the gap between the two positions appeared unbridgeable. Nevertheless, compromises were made on both sides and at various points towards the end of the session, agreement seemed within reach. But every time this was so on one side or the other wanted to clarify the meaning of the words in the procedural paper or the interpretation of its key paragraphs and this created new difficulties. The Special Session was extended twice in the hope that agreement would be reached. When it became clear that no language could adequately cover the concerns of some countries and there was not enough time before the beginning of the General Assembly to make further progress, the failure of the Session was admitted.

These difficulties with procedures reflect the complexity of the issues dealt with in the North-South dialogue. In a period of widespread economic stagnation some Western countries are very concerned about the rapid changes in a number of institutions, especially

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