

42. United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED)

The conference did not succeed in meeting all of its objectives and was considered by many, including the Secretary-General of the conference, Canadian Maurice Strong, to have fallen short on some key issues, especially given that the Biodiversity Convention and the Global Warming Convention were each products of completely separate negotiating tracks. In particular, Strong was critical of the lack of commitment by developed states in providing financial aid to less developed states.

This criticism reflects the deep division between North and South that plagued the conference from the beginning. Less developed states in the South believed that states in the North, having already reaped the benefits of using the environment for economic development, were, in their insistence on regulating the South's use of the environment, unwilling to recognize the needs of Southern nations for economic development. The reluctance of states in the North, especially the US, to come forward with financial assistance to compensate less developed states for their willingness to preserve rather than abuse the environment in their development efforts simply strengthened them in their view. The conference was never able to breach this basic difference in outlook.

Agreement was reached on five documents at the conference:

- **The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development** is a statement of 27 principles intended to guide states' environmental policies. These principles include, *inter alia*, statements that humans are entitled to a healthy productive life in harmony with nature, that states have the right to exploit their own resources, and that development must equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations. The principles also state that all countries should cooperate to eradicate poverty and that the needs of developing countries should be given priority. States are also called on to cooperate in preserving and restoring the Earth's ecosystem, to eliminate unsustainable patterns of production, and to enact effective environmental legislation. The special roles of women, youth and indigenous people are recognized in the 27 principles which also affirm the right of individuals to appropriate access to information on the environment.
- **The Biodiversity Convention** seeks to protect plants and animals in danger of extinction. States that use the genetic resources of another country must share the research, technology and profits resulting from the use of the resources, with that country. It was this element of the convention that prompted the US to refuse to sign. The treaty also includes a financial mechanism to help developing countries establish and run protection programmes.
- **The Global Warming Convention** requires emissions of "greenhouse" gases (those that are thought to trap heat in the atmosphere) to be stabilized at environmentally safe levels over the long run. Those states emitting most of the gases are required to hold their emissions at 1990 levels. The treaty contains a mechanism for monitoring other states' progress in limiting emissions and includes mechanisms for transferring technical and financial aid to developing