

20 June 1997

PRESS CONFERENCE ON AGENDA FOR DEVELOPMENT

The Vice-Chairmen of the General Assembly's ad hoc open-ended working group on the agenda for development, Michael Powles (New Zealand) and Percy M. Mangoaela (Lesotho), briefed correspondents on the outcome of the group's work at a Headquarters press conference yesterday afternoon, 19 June.

Responding to a correspondent's comment that the working group had not been very optimistic about the adoption of the agenda a few months back, Mr. Mangoaela said the working group had not lacked optimism about the agenda. However, it might not have been optimistic about a conclusion to the process of negotiating it. That could have been because the group had been caught in the vortex of diplomacy involving all the reform packages which were facing a hard time. The agenda for development had been a part of those and the working group had not been optimistic that it would be concluded during the fifty-first session.

Mr. Powles added that negotiations had been long and arduous over a number of years and there had been periods during those negotiations "like at 4:30 a.m. only about a week or 10 days ago" when despite negotiations continuing all night nothing had been achieved. It was instances like those that resulted in pessimism. However, there had been enormous political differences to bridge. At the end of the day, those had been bridged because it became quite clear that there was a genuine desire on the part of a majority of States to produce a useful outcome. For the United Nations to be unable to agree on an agenda for development after having discussed it for a number of years would have been an unmitigated disaster in terms of its international credibility.

In response to a question on how meaningful the agenda for development was, Mr. Mangoaela said "it is as meaningful as the Member States want it to be". He recalled that the agenda for development had emerged in the wake of the Secretary-General's elaboration of An Agenda for Peace. At that time, there had been a strong feeling that development was being marginalized in favour of peace and security. It was felt that there was a continued need to assert the United Nations primacy in the area of development. The South had demanded an agenda for development and the Secretary-General had made an attempt to produce one. However, that had been considered incomplete. As a result, Member States had chosen to negotiate an agenda for development.

The whole thrust of the agenda for development was to resituate the United Nations at the centre of development and to reaffirm that development was a very important task for it, he said. The agenda had covered a whole range of issues in the area of development. Basically, it was a document that clarified the United Nations position in the area of development. Much more importantly, there was a growing feeling that the longstanding partnership between the North and the South was beginning to wear thin. However, the fact

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that all the parties had sat through the process of negotiations was sufficient evidence that there was still a will on the part of all the members to reaffirm the centrality of development in the Organization's work.

Mr. Powles said the international environment was ever changing and there had been changes in the thinking about development. There was the whole question of sustainable development. The question of the weight that ought to be given to sustainable development versus economic growth had been a contentious one. Also relevant had been the question of decline in official development assistance (ODA) levels. In addition, there was the question of the relevance of good governance and human rights in the field of development. On that issue, the thinking on the part of the donor countries had developed significantly in recent times. So far as globalization was concerned, the fear of some developing countries of being marginalized had to be reflected in the document. Therefore, the Agenda was very much a document which sought to elaborate the terms of a development partnership in today's world.

To what extent were the Bretton Woods institutions involved in the preparation of the agenda? a correspondent asked. Mr. Powles said the relationship with the Bretton Woods institutions had been one of the significant and at times contentious issues discussed. Several members had expressed strong views that the policy coordinating role of the United Nations should bring the Bretton Woods institutions more under its wing. On the other hand, there was the view expressed that the Bretton Woods institutions were regarded as successful not least because of the way they operated. The Bretton Woods institutions had not been involved in the discussion because the discussion was intergovernmental and it would not have been appropriate for them to have played a part. However, the same governments which were members of the United Nations were a part of the Bretton Woods institutions. So the assumption was that governments which said something in one place would not say the opposite thing in another place.

Mr. Mangoaela added that two years ago at the Economic and Social Council, the World Bank President, James Wolfensohn, had made a very brutal statement that he was there to serve his shareholders and would not be coordinated by anyone else. A year later he had changed his tune. He had then recognized that for the World Bank to be successful in many of its own programmes it needed the political support of the entire world community. The World Bank under him had become considerably cooperative with the rest of the United Nations family.

How did the agenda for development affect the immediate reform process that was under way? a correspondent asked. Mr. Mangoaela said he did not see the agenda as being incompatible with ongoing reform process. There had been a recognition that the funds and programmes came under the rubric of the United Nations rather than the Bretton Woods institutions. Further, when one spoke about the role of the United Nations in development, the agenda addressed primarily the output of the funds and programmes in leveraging

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development as a complement to the Bretton Woods institutions. "We do not see the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Food Programme (WFP) or the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as being outside the purview of the agenda for development", he said, adding that, in fact, they were central as the vehicles for the delivery of United Nations assistance to Member States.

Answering another question, Mr. Powles said the agenda had three chapters and 287 paragraphs. The first two chapters dealt with the heart of development while the last chapter was more about institutional aspects and processes.

In response to a question on whether there were any "earth shaking" recommendations made in the agenda, Mr. Powles said he was not sure if in a document of 287 paragraphs on the subject of development one could expect to find earth shaking recommendations. Given the background of concern about the development partnership between the North and South, simply getting agreement on broad desirable outcomes was a significant achievement. The task of the working group as seen by it was to forge a framework for a partnership which would hold rather than get into a great deal of details. It was hoped that under such a partnership specifics would be sorted out.

Responding to another question, he said there would probably be some non-governmental organizations and other groups who would be annoyed that the agenda did not concentrate exclusively on sustainable development. However, it was not acceptable for the developed world to concentrate on sustainable development and say to the developing world "well, we got where we got by rampant, unrestricted economic growth without much consideration for the environment and now we are going to impose certain conditions on the nature of development you must pursue". That would be one of the more arrogant and difficult assertions to sustain. Therefore, what had been attempted in the document was to balance the need for sustainable development with the need for sustained economic growth.

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