

EDITORIAL

Africa finally finds a path through the desert

Kwasi Gyan-Apenteng

Paris: By the time African pressure for agreement on an international programme to combat desertification finally paid off in June, Western resistance had succeeded in watering down its provisions.

As one African delegate put it: «We have a document which is not what we hoped for but we will now be expected to work miracles with it.»

He was voicing a widespread Third World view that the Convention to Combat Desertification agreed at the United Nations in Geneva has been watered down to the point at which the final product bears little resemblance to the original intent.

The idea of a convention was born at the «Earth Summit» in Rio de Janeiro two years ago, largely as a result of African pressure. Africa saw it as a trade-off for the treaties on climate change and biodiversity and for concern with tropical deforestation, which were high on the agenda of the West.

Supported by the rest of the Third World, Africa argued that desertification affects more than 900 million people in 100 countries; in some countries is the biggest single environmental, social and economic threat, with the UN Environment Programme estimating the cost at \$42 billion a year; and is a global problem requiring a concerted international effort.

Although the subsequent negotiations have been dogged by difficulties, most were resolved through compromise and common sense — such as the split between Africa on one side and Latin America and Asia on the other over the priority to be given to Africa in the convention.

Africa's special position in the convention can be seen from the wording of the objectives: «... to combat desertification and mitigate the effect of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, through effective actions at all levels, supported by international cooperation and partnership arrangements... with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas.»

Asian and Latin American delegations feared that if a regional protocol for Africa was published as an annex to the convention, to be followed later by annexes for other regions, their countries would be forgotten in the allocation of resources.

It was finally agreed that all the regional annexes would be published simultaneously in the convention.

But it was money that provided the major sticking point, delaying the closing session and pushing the negotiations to the wire.

The Third World pressed for «new and additional» resources — that is, extra money in addition to existing aid allocations — for anti-desertification measures.

Southern countries wanted the North to finance an anti-desertification fund under the convention. The North balked, arguing instead for more efficient use of money and resources already promised.

The final formula does not promise more money, but leaves open the possibility of boosting funds through various mechanisms, including debt cancellation and swaps and low-interest loans and grants to the poorest countries.

While the tussle over money dominated much of the debate, other issues may ultimately alter the traditional notions of international cooperation and policy formulation in individual countries.

The convention envisages, for example, that the anti-desertification effort will be on the basis of cooperation and partnership not only between countries but between different sectors within countries — governments, non-government organisations, and women's youth and local community groups.

Many national anti-desertification efforts have failed because of a top-down approach emanating from government

ministers determining what would be appropriate for affected communities, thus failing to take advantage of painstakingly accumulated local knowledge.

The convention encourages full use of local participation and knowledge and urges the exchange of local information on mutually beneficial terms.

This is an innovative proposition, but it remains to be seen how it can be implemented. Even where governments are happy to work with local people and reward their contributions and knowledge, as suggested by the convention, there is no guarantee that the «local population concerned» will benefit rather than a chief or community bigwigs.

A problem not directly addressed by the convention but which could undermine its intentions is posed by land tenure systems.

In many countries, large areas of land have been taken over by rich and absentee farmers, turning local farmers into tenants. The relationship tends to loosen ties both between owners and land and local people and land, a situation likely to accelerate land degradation. Without a halt to the trend, the fine words in the convention will mean nothing.

Other causes for concern are an absence of political will among political leaders and within the international community, and the extensive reassessment of attitudes required for the framework of cooperation set out by the convention in areas such as technology transfer; information collection, analysis and exchange; research and development; public education; and capacity building.

Against that, there is recognition, in the words of a European Union negotiator, that «We are dealing with an issue we all recognise as grave. We cannot afford to fail.»

Kwasi Gyan-Apenteng,
Editor of «African Topics» magazine,
Panos Institute, 9 White Lion Street, London N1 9PD.
Phone: (0171) 278 1111.
United Kingdom.