

Report from Rio

"A GREAT SUCCESS", "a complete failure", "a spirit of compromise and goodwill", "a giant step", "the work has just started", and "UNCED rhetoric will not change the world". The conclusions are almost as diverse as the 40,000 people who travelled to Brazil and Rio de Janeiro for the Earth Summit.

The Rio Centro, a huge convention centre reconstructed for the twelve day event in June and dubbed the "capital of the world", was home to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). There the diplomats parleyed, UN officials organised, and the heads of state delivered their speeches.

Across town, under marquees in Rio's Flamengo Park, representatives of 14,000 non-government organisations (NGOs) met for their own gathering, the Global Forum.

Canterbury Regional Councillor, Labour Green and Forest and Bird member Diana Shand was one of two NGO representatives on New Zealand's 22-member delegation to the Earth Summit. She attended both the official UNCED conference and the Global Forum.

She says many NGO representatives came away from Rio disappointed "in the lack of strength in government positions and the compromises that were the final outcome". The Convention on Climate Change, presented for signing at UNCED, has been sharply criticised for its imprecise language and its failure to establish specific measures, targets, or a timetable to limit carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions.

The United States' failure to sign the Convention on Biodiversity was seen by many, including an umbrella group of around 100 Latin American NGOs, as completely undermining the convention's efforts to regulate the activities of biotechnology firms and com-

mercial access to and ownership of genetic material.

UNCED's statement of forest principles, which was developed when negotiations on a Forest Convention stalled, is very much a compromise between North and South. The statement calls for a recognition of the vital role of all types of forests in maintaining ecological processes but it is non-binding, and weaker in some areas than existing guidelines drawn up by the International Tropical Timber Organisation.

Shand says she was "incredibly impressed by the extraordinary depth of knowledge" displayed by NGO representatives. "At UNCED the diplomats and politicians were debating legal terms and technicalities while down at the Global Forum people were arguing about the realities and implications, often from first hand knowledge. . . . That's



EUGENIE SAGE

Diana Shand.

where all the expertise was gathered and where all the intense debate and analysis was going on."

The Global Forum produced around 30 "alternative treaties" on themes which included racism, fisheries, consumption and lifestyle, sustainable agriculture, poverty, the regulation of trans-national corporations, and food security. The treaties contain specific action plans for NGOs to implement on their home soil.

"Business and governments are being challenged by NGOs," says Shand. "NGOs

are saying 'we are not going to trade off the future for short term profits and trade off social and environmental concerns for economic returns'. They're saying that government and business currently don't measure up, and a change in direction and consumption patterns is required."

She sees some governments and businesses taking fright at the professionalism, power, and knowledge base displayed by many NGOs. This could lead to the involvement of NGOs in such gatherings being more restricted in future.

Shand says New Zealand should take a lead in "insisting on citizen participation, consultation, and partnership" in the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development and not allow it to become simply an "inter-governmental agency". The Commission is to be established by the United Nations in September to oversee compliance with the pledges made at the Earth Summit and direct the implementation of Agenda 21, the 800-page plan of action to protect and preserve the global environment into the 21st century.

Agenda 21 sets the political basis for the transfer of resources for sustainable development between industrialised and developing countries. The Commission will monitor this process, reporting through the United Nations Social and Economic Council. Agenda 21 contains some powerful rhetoric but the 128 developing nations of the "Group of 77" and UNCED Secretary General Maurice Strong were among those who expressed "disappointment" at the lacklustre commitment by industrial countries to financing it.

New Zealand has certainly made a feeble start. In 1991-92 our foreign aid budget was \$147 million, equivalent to 0.18 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), well short of the United Nations guideline of 0.7 percent of GDP. Despite a pledge at Rio that New

Zealand would work towards achieving the UN target, National's July Budget cut overseas development aid by \$7 million to \$142 million for 1992-93.

In an open and supportive international economic climate with more trade access, developing countries should be able to earn more through exports than they now receive in official development aid.

Shand says her commitment to the "think global, act local" maxim was reinforced by attendance at the Rio Summit. "It is the sum total of individual action which is going to save the Earth. What we do with CO₂ emissions may be infinitesimal in the eyes of the world, but New Zealand has a part to play in a global partnership. A partnership is only as strong as its weakest link. I would hate to see New Zealand ever considered as anything but one of the strongest links, taking a lead for peace, and for the oceans and biodiversity."

Perhaps the most important political achievement of the UNCED process and the Global Forum was to bring the issue of environment centre stage and give a renewed sense of urgency and purpose to work for a more equitable and environmentally sound world order.

There is a widespread recognition that the patterns of consumption and production and lifestyles of those in the industrialised countries are not sustainable, and that these must change to be a less onerous burden on the world's finite resources and the capacity of an already degraded environment.

The success of efforts here will be the real measure of the achievements of both UNCED and the Global Forum.

Eugenie Sage



Forest and Bird is a member of the International Council for Bird Preservation and is the ICBP's delegate in the South Pacific.