In Other Fields

DESTINATION: BEIJING VIA COPENHAGEN

by Rhonda Birenbaum

With the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing only weeks away, Caroline Pestieau, Director General of Social Sciences at IDRC, reflects on the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen last March. For Pestieau, the Copenhagen summit represents a crucial stepping stone to Beijing. In this interview, Pestieau, who also attended many of the unofficial events of the summit, discusses lessons learned and opportunities missed.

Why do you believe Copenhagen was a lead-up to Beijing?

The focus of Beijing is women in development. Copenhagen gives us a lot to build on in that area. For instance, the importance of women as agents of development comes through very clearly in the summit documents. This viewpoint finally got the public airing it deserves.

What's more, women's issues were the ones that most people agreed on.

Does the prominence achieved by women's issues in Copenhagen herald a new perspective for UN world conferences?

I hope so. The Copenhagen summit tried to counterbalance the current emphasis on economics by bringing social issues to the fore. Future summits can no longer ignore them.

The rhetoric of the Copenhagen summit documents seems different from that of previous summits. What has changed?

The official summit documents refer often to values and value-laden topics, such as gender, family, sexuality, identity, culture, violence, property rights, treatment of minorities and vulnerable groups. The need to respect social priorities, to write off debt, the link between poverty and insecurity, the importance of culture and values, and the right to development appear as well. In addition, the role of civil society in development comes out loud and clear. Finally, a lot of language insists that social development objectives and social programs should not simply be considered but given priority.

All these statements reflect a new language for world summits. Surprisingly, all UN members were able to agree on these issues. However, there was no agreement on concrete measures to increase aid.
How have your experiences at the Copenhagen summit affected your view of social development?

The summit has deepened it. It also heightened my awareness of the importance of values. As I understand it, social development refers to the kind of development that makes civil society civil and prevents social disintegration. It includes the mechanisms which allow individuals to cope with poverty, deal with unemployment or underemployment, and find satisfying ways of participating in society. Such mechanisms help societies manage the tension between tradition and modernization and hence to cope with globalization.

What was the reaction of environmental NGOs to the summit perspective on environmental issues as reflected in official documents?

Environmentalists were disappointed by the use of social development, sustainable development and sustainable growth as apparently interchangeable. There seems to have been no serious discussion of environmental limits to growth and inequitable access to and use of natural resources. Environmental sustainability is mentioned in the documents but its implications are not spelled out.

How did the summit address the concept of social cohesion, historically an important element of social development?

Social cohesion has assumed an importance that wasn’t conceived of 20 or 30 years ago. The discussions on social cohesion recognized that social development is inseparable from the economic, political, ecological and cultural environment in which it takes place. That is, social development can only take place in a society that everybody feels in some way a part of.

Social cohesion used to be considered synonymous with peace and was taken for granted, except in times of war, famine and plague. The summit may have helped leaders understand that, like clean air and water, social cohesion is no longer a free good but requires effort and investment to create and nourish it.

Summit organizers had hoped that the choice of summit themes poverty alleviation, gainful employment and social cohesion would bridge the North-South divide. Did they?

I don’t think there was a real sense of shared experience. However, people from the South did realize that the North is not going to increase oda. People from the North realized that the South’s problems threaten the already battered security of the North. I’m thinking of problems such as refugees leading to racism and violence in Europe or exploited Southern labour undercutting Northern labour.

A next positive step would be a sharing of successful cases of social development and reintegration.

More and more development assistance now goes to emergency humanitarian aid, drying up funds for longer-term development assistance. Did the summit offer answers to this growing problem?

The summit itself did not offer suggestions, but it did put this issue on the global agenda as never before. First, the link between insecurity, poverty, unemployment and social disintegration has assumed a global status. It is no longer relegated to discussions within specialized agencies. Secondly, the 20/20 initiative has become a part of un language. Even if it was not adopted as an official commitment, the notion that 20% of development aid and 20% of national budgets should be directed toward social programs has become a sort of unofficial benchmark by which to measure assistance packages or aid expenditures.

Did you see any missed opportunities in Copenhagen?
The absence of follow-up mechanisms disappointed many people, myself included. No dates or measurable targets were set. No verification or reporting mechanisms were devised. Without follow-up mechanisms, the summit may be seen as a waste of money.

There was also the absence of the IMF at the NGO forum. It looked as if the IMF did not want to deal with people outside the official delegations.

There was strong support from the South and from some Northern countries for a UN mechanism to monitor the international financial institutions but only a watered-down statement got into the documents. Many delegations as well as NGOs, noted the need to control and reduce financial speculation. Between 600 and 800 out of an estimated 2500 NGOs signed an Alternative Declaration. Its main features include an attack on the endorsement [contained in the Summit Declaration] of the market as the key element in social development and a much stronger emphasis on sustainable development.

Can such large conferences continue to be effective, or are there more productive ways of bringing together the world community?

The Copenhagen summit played an important role in establishing links between poverty, unemployment and social cohesion and in getting these issues into worldwide discussions. I also believe it will be seen to have prevented any backsliding between Cairo, the summit that came before [on population and development], and Beijing, the summit to follow.

However, I suggest the agenda was too broad. Smaller conferences may accomplish more from an intellectual standpoint. On the other hand, you have to choose whether to have a conference of experts or a conference of heads of state. Personally, I don’t think a smaller, regional conference would have been better.