



# From earth summit to **social summit**

*Has the developing world hijacked what was supposed to be a bunny hugging exercise to deal with sustainable development?*

**Markus Reichardt** explores this and other issues surrounding the WSSD.

**A**ny commentary about the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) speaks about the tens of thousands of delegates, hundred plus heads of state, and the thousands of journalists who will descend on Johannesburg during August 2002.

On the surface it appears that the country is heading for a tourism bonanza as thousands flock to our most beautiful sites before or after the Summit, while the government will bask in the prestige of hosting this milestone event. But what is the agenda of the Summit and what can it truly deliver? Will what it delivers truly be of benefit to South and southern Africa?

Beyond the once-off (and thus unsustainable) tourist dollar, few actually know what the Summit will deliver for the people and the environment of the subcontinent.

Though many still refer to it as an 'Earth Summit' the agenda has changed and environmental issues are no longer the focus. There is a history to this and it is one that has plagued the earlier Earth Summits. One of the great popular misconceptions about

the Summit is that it will not be an event for individuals to present weighty issues in learned papers to a distinguished audience. The WSSD is a UN Summit and formally can only produce an agreement or declaration between or from governments. The statement or agreement can of course refer to or quote from other work. There is no mechanism for 'business' and/or the NGO sector collectively to agree or to commit to anything. In fact, neither business nor NGOs formally participate as players in the core Summit events. Instead they are relegated to side events.

Regardless of their role, an intergovernmental agreement or declaration could include exhortations to business or other groups to do this or that. This does not amount to a commitment from NGOs or business (nor really from governments). However, since the whole thrust of the private and non-profit sector' involvement is to participate as a partner in the move towards sustainable development, one must be seen to be participating. It would be up to business or NGOs to place themselves under moral obligation by

publicly committing to an agreement or by pushing a set of similar principles. This is a critical point since in the short-term, none of the declarations or conventions is likely to produce any substantive change. Where their impact will be felt is that these hefty works set the framework for future legislative developments in many (though by no means all) participating nations. It is thus understandable that stakeholders from all sides feel the need to participate in the Summit so as to influence its outcome.

But can the many thousands do this effectively? The Summit's agenda is set long beforehand at a series of preparatory committee meetings organised by the UN. That is where the real lobbying takes place. By the time the delegates get to Sandton, it will take a major event, indeed a crisis, for an item to get onto the agenda. Indeed the closing speeches have already been written. When Johannesburg was first confirmed as the host city the event was still being called the 'Rio plus ten Summit' or the 'Earth Summit'. More recently the WSSD has become the more accepted label.

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There is a reason for this shift. After three preparatory committee meetings to discuss the WSSD agenda, there are comparatively few truly green (environmental) issues left. What is happening is a replay of the tug of war between the developed and developing nations over the purpose of the event. The same thing transpired at the 1972 Stockholm Earth Summit and the 1992 Rio Earth

The user-friendly nature of its definition ensured its survival.

In 1977 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was commissioned to draft a document to present 'global perspectives on the myriad of conservation problems that beset the world and a means of identifying the most effective solutions to the priority problems.' This document, published in 1980 as the

forerunners, the WCS wanted to sell conservation to the development constituency, but it did not understand what the development constituency was like. Politically naive, it did not accept development as the driving force in human affairs. This is the change the Brundtland Commission introduced successfully. It argued that the environment 'does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions,

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Initially, neither conference commanded support from the developing countries. They feared that environmental and developmental problems were being separated, and the sense of integration and of shared problems between the developed and developing world was being lost. In 1972 these developing country concerns about the detrimental economic effects of environmental protection policies had to be addressed for fear of a conference boycott on their part. In order to allay the fears of developing nations that environmental protection would not go against their interests and would not affect their positions in international trade, the organisers made a statement of faith that development and environment could be combined in some way that would optimise ecological and economic systems. They did so without explaining how. Out of this compromise grew the concept of sustainable development.

World Conservation Strategy (WCS), broke new ground in that it moved many major environmental NGOs to a position where for the first time 'development could be seen as a major means of achieving conservation, rather than an obstruction to it. In a significant repackaging of conservation, environmental modification became a natural and necessary part of development, even if only certain kinds of such modification would achieve the social and economic objectives of development. By this argument that development planning should not only be socially and economically sound but also fit conservation objectives, the Strategy established the basic triad of mainstream sustainable development thinking in the 1990s: economic, social and environmental sustainability. Unfortunately, it too stayed away from specifics; but the theoretical framework was there.

The sustainable development debate then stagnated because, like its

ambitions, and needs, and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word "environment" a connotation of naiveté.'

The Brundtland Commission (named after a former Swedish Prime Minister who chaired the process) attempted to recapture the 'spirit of Stockholm' whose demise environmental groups lamented. It succeeded where the WCS failed. It managed to get its mandate from the UN General Assembly (rather than a specific agency or NGO) to debate environment and development as one issue. It was the legitimacy of this body that made the Brundtland definition for Sustainable Development, the standard that endures to this day: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

The Rio Summit built the compromise a different way, it simply

increased the number of green issues and rewrote some of them to accommodate some social concerns. At the time however, environmental sentiment in the developed world was sufficiently aroused so as to withstand developing nations' pressure more firmly. The tensions between developed and developing nations also shaped the texts of the Rio Documents themselves. The Rio Declaration was not the strong and sharp 'Earth Charter' originally conceived by the UN. Its 27 principles were diluted to 'a bland declaration that provides something for everyone'.

The main output of Rio, although it is probably the least read, was Agenda 21. This is a vast document, containing 40 separate chapters amounting to more than 600 pages. It was drafted and argued over minutely by government lawyers and officials. It is both a great compendium of sustainable development ideas and issues, as well as a hard-won agreement that gets as close as one can to a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level on development and environmental cooperation. Despite its size there are a few key themes worth noting:

- the 'revitalisation of growth with sustainability';
- Agenda 21 maintained all the familiar environmental issues of the World Conservation Strategy;
- it argues for growth to power, and for technology to direct, the evolution of policy towards more efficient use of the environment. Through a multi-lateral and participatory approach it sees this as the path to a more sustainable world economy.

Now ten years after the Rio Summit and the adoption of Agenda 21, conference organisers face a dilemma:

No matter how one dresses it up, virtually no country has developed its own national strategy for the implementation of Agenda 21, let alone attempted to pursue material implementation initiatives. Truth be told, it has been primarily NGO and private sector initiatives (sometimes in partnership with each other or governments) that have made some strides along the path charted in Agenda 21.

Governments of developing nations, who have, in part due to lack of capacity, been the most lacking in advancing concrete action on Agenda 21. They now have a reason to downgrade the importance of this key Rio document while at the same time advancing a larger agenda. As a result there has been a shift away from an environmental focus to matters of poverty alleviation and global equity. In line with this shift, the South African government now has developed the following list of Summit priorities:

- health
- education
- access to water and sanitation
- access to energy
- food and security
- technology.

This is a view of sustainable development that places human needs at the centre rather than seek the balance between environmental, social and economic needs.

No-one can deny that poverty is a key driver in human degradation of the environment. However, by refocusing the Summit's agenda on issues around these social issues the leaders of developing countries find it easier to distract those who may wish to question the lack of action on the earlier commitments made at Rio. It could also be argued that this need is also at the heart of the 'partnership concept' punted so heavily by many

governments and UN bodies. Alone stakeholders – and governments are no exception – have achieved little. By teaming up with those who have had more of an impact – the NGOs and the private sector – they can recover some high ground through delivery.

So the Summit is likely to produce some declaration on poverty alleviation and on global equity. By the time the various stakeholders among the thousands have had their say, there will be so much compromise in the documents, that they are likely to have the same impact as the Rio declarations and conventions before them. In order to avoid this some NGOs are calling on the UN and the Summit organisers to deliver a concrete programme of action with measurable outcomes that will make a difference to the lives of the world's poor. At present there is no indication that this will influence the debates at the preparatory committee sessions. <sup>LB</sup>

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## References

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