

The wrong place for a 'sustainable development' Summit

*Is the WSSD a scam? **Patrick Bond** explores whether market policies are being 'green washed' to ensure business as usual both internationally and in South Africa.*

It was a strange day: 25 June 2002. Thabo Mbeki was on his way to the G8 Summit in the Canadian Rocky Mountain hideaway of Kananaskis. A fortnight earlier, he made the cover of *Time* magazine above the title, 'Mbeki's mission: He has finally faced up to the Aids crisis and is now leading the charge for a new African development plan. But will he succeed?'

Stopping en route in Rio de Janeiro, Mbeki was guest of honour at a UN Conference on Environment and Development 'torch handing over ceremony'. There, he told Brazilian president Henrique Cardoso and Swedish prime minister Goran Persson that, in the spirit of Stockholm '72 and Rio '92, South Africa's largest city would take up the mantle of symbolic global leadership:

'The Johannesburg World Summit must take further our pledge at the Millennium Summit [of September 2000 in New York] to eradicate poverty. It must focus on implementation and action.

Its outcome must make sense to she who has to walk for kilometres to fetch drinking water and to she who spends hours gathering firewood for energy. It must also speak to he who

consumes more than the earth can give.

When leaders of the world gathered here in 1992, my country was still under apartheid rule. I did not enjoy the right to vote. Uncertainty and conflict loomed... Since the victory of democracy in 1994, seven million people have access to clean water, over one million homes for poor people have been built, over two million more homes now have electricity and every child has a place in school. And, South Africa is acting as host to the World Summit on Sustainable Development..'

And, as Mbeki spoke, evening fell on wintry South Africa. The majority of rural women still walked to fetch water and gather firewood. The majority of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois urban men, your correspondent included, still consumed far too much.

Since the Rio Summit in June 1992, prospects for reconciling wealth and poverty in Johannesburg, and across the African continent, have faded. Vast sums of apartheid-era loot skipped South Africa since liberation, though sadly the most parasitic major business elite in the world (or perhaps

second to Russia's) stayed behind to enjoy the sun and continue to influence politics and economics. The currency crashes periodically, setting average dollar-denominated GDP back to 1950s levels. Tens of billions of rands are being spent by Pretoria's generals on sophisticated weaponry. Ten million people reportedly have had their water cut off, and another ten million were victims of electricity disconnections, mainly due to affordability. Two million people have been evicted from their homes or land. A million formal-sector jobs have evaporated. HIV/AIDS is slowly, inexorably killing millions more South Africans, while Mbeki remains in denial, openly accused by Pretoria's leading state medical researcher of pursuing a 'genocidal' policy.

Welcome to Johannesburg

Delegates flying into Johannesburg in late August will descend to the highveld by breaking through a thick brown cloud of particulates.

Temperature inversions and the lack of rain for the past four months are the natural reasons Johannesburg's 1 500m elevation and brisk winds still do not provide clean air in winter.

In this region, the settlers' conquest of nature, particularly since gold was discovered in 1886, is especially grotesque. Viewed from the air, filthy smudges of human fingerprints are everywhere to partake: concentrated industrial pollution over the east-west factory strip and the multi-chimneyed power plant astride the airport; gold-mine dumps to the south of the city which perpetually blow sand and dust into black neighbourhoods; periodic bush fires; and the ongoing use of coal and fuel wood for cooking and heating in impoverished townships like Soweto and Alexandra.

It would be wrong to blame the victims: low-income black people. Across the country, the drive towards electricity commercialisation and privatisation these past few years has meant supply cut-offs for more than a million households who cannot afford price increases. From the air, be thankful that we do not experience the most dangerous results, such as the return to dirtier forms of energy and the re-emergence of tuberculosis and other rampant respiratory infections that threaten the lives of South Africa's five million HIV-positive people.

Looking down, our eyes are soon drawn away to the bright green of well-watered English gardens and thick alien trees that shade traditionally-white – now slightly desegregated – suburbs, permeated by ubiquitous sky-blue swimming pools.

The way we use water tells volumes about society. When gold was discovered, thousands of fortune hunters were drawn inland immediately. Johannesburg soon became the planet's largest metropolis with no substantial natural water source. Seventy-five kilometres to the south, the Vaal River is pumped uphill to Johannesburg, but by the 1980s it became apparent that the source would be insufficient for the next century's industries and suburbanites.

Apartheid-era engineers and World



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Bank project officers tried to solve the looming shortages with a dam and tunnel scheme that draws water several hundred kilometres from across a mountain range atop the small and perpetually impoverished nation of Lesotho. Africa's largest infrastructure project, costing an estimated \$8bn if all six dams are built, is now less than half finished but has already displaced tens of thousands of Basotho peasants, inundated sacred land, threatened endangered species and endangered the Orange River's downstream ecosystem.

Who pays the bills? Johannesburg water prices went up by 35% during the late 1990s, but township residents in the lowest consumption tier found themselves paying 55% more because of the cost of the Lesotho dams, which the old Botha regime needed surreptitious funding for during the mid-1980s due to apartheid-era financial sanctions. The World Bank set up a secret London account to facilitate matters, overriding objections from the liberation movement, including its then representative in Ireland, Kader Asmal.

As South Africa's water minister from 1994-99, Asmal was chosen to chair the 1998-2000 World Commission on Dams. Entangled in the massive contradictions and hypocrisies, he refused to let the commission study the

Lesotho dam and angrily rejected grassroots demands – from Alexandra, Soweto and Lesotho – that over consumptive water users in the mines, factories and mansions be made more responsible for paying the dam's bills and for conserving water so as to prevent future dam construction. Such 'demand-side management' would also have included repair of perpetual leaks in the apartheid-era township infrastructure, where half of Soweto's water is lost.

Bankers were anxious to continue financing, and construction companies ready to keep building, the multi-billion dollar dams. The World Bank's Inspection Panel refused a full investigation of township residents' complaints in 1998. The Bank also went to great lengths to protect a corrupt senior official in the project, Masupha Sole, from being fired, in spite of documented bribes to his Swiss bank account – for over a decade (1988-98) – by a dozen of the world's largest construction companies.

Then, not only did the Bank refuse to bar the companies from further contracts, but it withdrew promised financial support for their 2001-02 public prosecution in Lesotho by claiming that it was penalising only the three middle-men who abused the Bank's loan funds. The Bank's sleazy

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side was on such display that even Pretoria's director-general of water affairs was heard to comment on national radio that Washington should learn to 'walk the [anti-corruption] talk'.

Asmal's replacement as water minister, Ronnie Kasrils, finally announced a halt to further dam construction, once the second Lesotho mega-dam, Mohale, is complete in 2004. Yet no environmentalist or community activist trusts Kasrils' instincts, in the wake of his simultaneous rejection of the Dam Commission report's guidelines as binding, and his trip to China's ultra-destructive Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, which he endorsed, inexplicably.

Kasrils has also failed to keep his own rivers clean, including the Vaal, less than an hour's drive south of Johannesburg. In what is quickly emerging as South Africa's most humiliating single environmental case of contemporary corporate heartlessness and government paralysis, the iron/steel firm (and former mega-parastatal) Iscor is dumping cadmium-infected effluent waste from its main smelter at

Vanderbijlpark. Uniting in opposition to the firm's lying management, black and white workers and other Vaal residents have discovered that beginning in 1961, the company has ruined the surrounding water table through toxic dumping into unlined dams.

Cancer soon spread into the communities through what activists term 'vast lakes of toxic waste' stretching for 140h. The 7km long plume of poisoned water will soon probably reach Boipatong Township where tens of thousands of people are at risk. Repeatedly, and as recently as 1999, government water officials granted exemptions from the Water Act. If withheld, the exemptions would have prevented further pollution – but that would have entailed Pretoria taking the environment seriously and tackling corporate power conclusively.

Behind the pollution

As is true across the world, Johannesburg's worsening environmental mess is mainly due to the logic of capital accumulation, at a time of rampant environmental deregulation associated with the 1992 United Nations Conference on

Environment and Development in Rio.

The ANC's 'Igoli 2002' privatisation plan, drafted alongside World Bank consultants, was renamed by critics 'E.coli 2002' for a good reason: excrement from Johannesburg's slums – where water is still denied by the French water privatiser Suez, beneficiary of a huge commercialisation contract – regularly despoiled Sandton's borehole water supplies.

By then, cholera was devastating the countryside from which many Zulu-speaking migrant labourers emerge after their brief Christmas break. The disease spread, inevitably, to Alexandra township, Sandton's reserve army of labour which is home to an estimated 300 000 people crammed into just over two square miles of mainly squalid housing. The disease quickly killed four residents, and internationally televised apartheid-style forced removals were the bureaucrats' answer.

Conclusion

The African National Congress itself recognised the enormous problems of the host city in its July message to the Global Civil Society Forum:

'The Johannesburg Summit convenes against the backdrop a city visibly scarred by the profound contradictions of its history. Wealth and poverty lie cheek by jowl, a stone's throw from the central venue of the intergovernmental conference. And Jo'burg's landscape is strewn with the waste of 100 years of resource extraction; in the service of which South Africa's racial hierarchy was constructed with violent determination. The city's contemporary social and environmental panorama is an ever-present reminder of our country's painful past. This divided geography also reflects the state of the world as we enter the 21Century: a globalised world built on the foundation of imperial conquest and colonial domination, which continues to define the contours of privilege and underdevelopment.'

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