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Is There a Crisis in International Environmental and Development Policy?

After the Johannesburg Summit

Andreas Rechkemmer

Some two months after the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg discussion is now focused on how to effectively implement the resolutions that were passed on such matters as fighting poverty, protecting natural resources and changing modes of production and consumption. For many observers and decision makers, the least-common-denominator-type consensus that was reached – typical for UN-brokered compromises – does not go far enough. They are asking whether alternative approaches for the implementation of international agreements is possible. The German-European unilateral course on renewable energy suggests a pragmatic and promising development for making progress in environmental and development policy, despite the current paralysis of multilateral mechanisms in international politics.

The 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro was regarded at the time as incomparable and the most important event to date in global environmental politics. The conference represented a watershed due to comprehensive calls for linking environmental and development issues for the first time. Expectations of the representatives from the 180 participating countries ran high, and the concept of sustainable development, which had become a sort of slogan, introduced a paradigm shift in international cooperation. A number of key multilateral resolutions and agreements were agreed on at UNCED, above all the global plan of action »Agenda 21«.

Expectations were high for the following decade regarding prevention of environmental catastrophes, a just organization of global markets and the fight against poverty and famine. The nineties were supposed to bring about a worldwide change in consciousness.

The international community came together once again from August 26 to September 4, 2002, in Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). The UN conference, the largest ever to date, provided an opportunity for a comprehensive review of the achievements in sustainable development since Rio. At the same time, it was expected

to provide new impetus for a breakthrough on urgent matters.

The Nineties: A Lost Decade?

The mood following UNCED was euphoric. Many non-governmental organizations identified with the principles and agenda of the summit and called for greater participation by civil society in international politics. The media's interest in environmental and development issues grew, as did academic attention. Initiatives which sought to implement the plans set out in Agenda 21 were started by local and regional governments. And a growing number of consumers and companies contributed to making sustainable development a market factor.

At the official level, the conventions on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification as well as forest principles were passed in Rio. Further agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol, were arrived at later which fleshed out additional details.

In addition to reforming the institutional framework for the implementation of the new agreements, changes to the principles of inter-state cooperation were also expected to take place. The large UNEP and UNDP bureaucracies were to be complemented by small, flexible convention secretariats, so called facilitating agencies, which were to function as brokers and hosts rather than as central administrators. At the same time, greater reliance on multi-lateralism was promoted as an effective alternative to classical development aid appropriations.

Prior to the conference in Johannesburg, however, it was already clear that the record of the Rio decade left a lot to be desired in terms of the effectiveness and the achievements of the agreements and action plans mentioned above. This resulted in both raising expectations and doubts in equal measure. Would the world summit finally bring about the turning point in international environmental policy that many had demanded for so long? Would

it be capable of providing the decisive impetus to cooperation on development issues?

Johannesburg: Vague Results, But Not a Complete Failure

When it comes to assessing the record of results from Johannesburg, the skeptics are having a field day. In their eyes, the final document points to progress on a number of issues, but the qualifications added to nearly every conclusion leave them skeptical. World fish reserves *ought to be* protected by 2015. The most dangerous toxins to the environment are to be banned, but violators have *no sanctions* to fear. Subsidies for fossil fuels should be reduced, though *no strict time frame* was agreed on. There are also a number of impressive sounding declarations of intent: free and democratic access to fresh water was established as a basic right, energy production from non-fossil fuels is to be fostered, and the necessity of debt relief for the poorest countries was recognized. But, here too, the prospect a breakthrough is questionable given the lack of concrete plans of action and clear mechanisms for imposing sanctions. The final documents are full of lax time frames and goals, open questions regarding financing and a lack of ideas of how to implement the plethora of good intentions at the institutional and organizational level.

The German representatives Jürgen Trittin (Minister for the Environment) and Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul (Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development), on the other hand, interpret the record more positively. Above all, they note that measures to ensure safe water and drinking water for the world's poor, one of the EU's biggest goals, were achieved. According to them, another success story was the agreement by the US – despite a rejection of concrete time frames and quotas – to the basic goal of putting an end to species extinction and to reducing the dangerous effects of chemicals. Moreover, they

described regulations for corporate liability, fisheries and a review of modes of consumption and production in industrialized states, as well as the mention of »common public goods« such as air and the oceans, as steps in the right direction.«

Germany viewed energy as a central issue. Providing access to the world's two billion people living without electricity with an environmentally sound form of this energy was, along with the previously mentioned issue of access to water resources, the other of the two major goals of the summit. According to Wiczorek-Zeul and Trittin, energy and water are the issues that most clearly embody the notion of sustainability and are therefore the most important. The theory goes that securing basic provisions for electricity and water helps fight poverty, improves health, increases economic opportunities and protects the environment, provided renewable energy sources are used.

Yet even before the conference, the EU had lowered its sights. For example, the EU proposed increasing the share of electricity produced by renewable energy sources to 15 percent by 2010, only marginally up from the current figure of 13 percent. Nevertheless, this modest attempt by the EU was shot down by the US and OPEC member states.

Klaus Töpfer, who had helped shape the 1992 Rio summit when he was German Minister for the Environment, drew his own conclusions as head of the UN Environment Program. Important progress was made at Johannesburg, he says. He was initially concerned that the summit would, in the end, reveal itself as merely cosmetic. In fact, Töpfer let it be known that he considers the Plan of Implementation of the WSSD – the most important final document – insufficient.

Still it would be inappropriate to declare the summit a failure. First, the very fact that it took place is in itself important. This has helped put global environmental policy back on the international agenda. The identification and acknowledgement of

the central issues and goals of sustainable development in the final documents is also important. This provides an updated and nearly complete frame of reference for future initiatives and negotiations, be they unilateral, bilateral or multilateral. And 190 states were able to agree on a detailed list of actions, something that could not have been assumed prior to the summit. Thus, a common vision is in place and many important issues were taken into account.

The key question is whether the plan of action, which is based on an already minimal consensus, will be effectively implemented. The current established institutional framework for international cooperation and the shrinking willingness of rich states in particular to cooperate on a multilateral basis leave room for doubt.

Is Traditional Multilateralism Temporarily Out of Order?

It became one of the rituals of Johannesburg to criticize the US and denounce them for the immobility on climate change issues in particular. Upon closer examination, however, this criticism appears to be too one-sided. Japan, for example, shot down the demand for more foreign aid. Brazil refused to protect its rainforest according to international standards. And France insisted on maintaining EU agricultural subsidies. Particularistic state interests characterized the global meeting.

There is a firm trend discernable among OECD member states in particular of renewed emphasis on protecting their own interests and concern with solving national problems. This is counter to the notion of global governance which would entail seeking consensus at the international level at the expense of particular interests. To this extent, revival of the wave of multilateralism of the early nineties is currently out of sight. Explanations offered for this development include the weak economy and protectionist tendencies.

Without a doubt, at the moment there is no momentum for a global collaborative effort to solve common problems, however necessary and desirable that would be. Furthermore, we cannot and should not expect the organs of multilateral cooperation, the UN institutions, to provide results that are not brought about by the member states working in concert. Inefficiency and chronic under financing of the existing instruments simply adds to the difficulties.

A Pragmatic Alternative Approach As a Way Out of the Crisis

This could be the hour of a practical middle way, along the lines pursued by the German government in Johannesburg in its offensive on energy policy outside the official summit activities. Initiatives of individual states or groups of states and their allies of convenience in so called coalitions of the willing seems to be the only way out at the moment of the dilemma posed by the current gridlock in the implementation of important environmental and development measures. It could soon lead to first stage victories, for example in the area of climate protection, and overcome the extensive inertia.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder succeeded in Johannesburg in getting the EU and dozens of other states to sign a declaration calling for the promotion and firm establishment of renewable energy that was outside the framework of the summit and goes well beyond the conclusions of the final document. And Greenpeace declared that the agreement by China, Canada and Russia to sign the Kyoto climate protocol is more important than all the summit results taken together.

These important moves forward which go well beyond the official conference results were arrived at parallel to the summit and are not part of the tediously negotiated final documents. The strength of these initiatives lies in the very fact that they are not orientated toward the least

common denominator, rather they are manifestations of the political intentions of those who are truly interested in progress and change. That improves their chances of success.

It may well be that a strategy that seeks to unite progressive states of the world is the only way to make the transition to global sustainability. The Kyoto Protocol, which was roundly praised at the world summit, will most likely take effect in 2003. Although only a first step, this could set a new dynamic in motion that helps promote the use of better energy technology, not just in the rich North, but also in the poor South. The second glimmer of hope lies in the EU and other states that want to lead the way, both at a national level and in cooperation with developing countries, even without concrete goals set out at Johannesburg. The initiative announced by Chancellor Schröder can be considered an example.

World summits organized by the United Nations will still need to take place given that they alone can provide a suitable platform for global communication and interaction, not the least of which with civil society. The critical question remains whether the goal of getting *all* participating countries to sign final documents, along with the corresponding compromises in formulations that entails, should be abandoned. If at future summits the international community were to free itself from the pressure to come to a consensus, and instead used such summits as global forums for forming coalitions of the willing around decisive issues, the interests of those people who are most affected by environmental destruction and under-development might well be better served.

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