



THE PINCHOT LETTER

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Coda: Johannesburg, 2002

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Obviously, this is not Rio,” said United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the conclusion of the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, August 19 to September 4, 2002. And indeed, it was not.

THE PAST

The Earth Summit ten years earlier in Rio de Janeiro was a landmark event. It produced an outstanding blueprint for sustainable development, “Agenda 21;” two major international conventions on climate and biodiversity protection and a commitment to desertification by a third; the beginnings of the Earth Charter; the important Rio Principles to guide international decision-making; and a commitment to almost double development assistance funding. By contrast, WSSD’s Plan of Implementation is a faint echo, though there were a few notable accomplishments.

THE PRESENT

Whether one deems the Johannesburg Summit a failure or a very modest success depends on the measuring stick one applies. If one asks whether the Summit responded seriously to global-scale environmental threats or brought globalization and sustainable development together, the only honest answer is that it did not

and that the Summit, in failing to rise to the moment, was a huge missed opportunity. Environmental leaders have been almost unanimous in voicing dismay, though they have not lost their sense of humor. The World Wildlife Fund called WSSD the “World Summit on Shameful Deals,”



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and Greenpeace noted that the Plan of Action on energy “is not much of a plan and contains almost no action.”

When the heads of state took the podium in the final days, speaker after speaker attacked the plan as too weak, and after formally agreeing to the text, the delegates from almost 200

nations applauded for just ten seconds. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was heckled. The anger at the United States was palpable. Not only was President George W. Bush not among the 104 heads of state in attendance, but the United States had fought with considerable success against tough targets and timetables, including the European proposal to set a goal of having 15% of countries’ energy provided by renewable sources by 2015. Iran, Iraq, most of the OPEC countries and Japan joined the United States in this successful opposition.

Across the entire political spectrum, almost everyone at Johannesburg accepted the proposition that the excellent agreements reached at Rio had not been effectively implemented or, as was the case with the commitment to increase development assistance, had been honored in the

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Leadership in Forest Conservation Thought, Policy and Action



breach. WSSD, therefore, was to be about implementation. Jacob Scherr at the Natural Resources Defense Council said WSSD should be the Down to Earth Summit.

THE NEED

A year before the Summit, Maurice Strong, who ably led the previous environment and development conferences at Stockholm and Rio, wrote that “what is needed for Johannesburg is a clearly stated theme or goal, together with concrete measures and firm commitments to spe-

cific targets designed to measure progress along the way.” I was among those at that time who strongly agreed with Strong that Johannesburg would succeed if agreements were reached on specific plans of action to which governments were unambiguously committed, with targets and timetables and commitments to funding. Nothing else could close the huge credibility and accountability gaps that had opened since Rio.

My meeting to discuss these matters with Secretary-General Annan was scheduled on September 11, and

I arrived at Grand Central Station just as the first of the twin towers collapsed. When we did finally meet in October, we went over possible areas where definite, concrete plans of action with specific, funded and time-bound objectives might be framed for WSSD, including: 1) providing secure, committed funding and other support needed to meet the Millennium Development Goals, such as the goal of halving world poverty by 2015; 2) complementing the Kyoto Protocol with commitments to end

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ABOUT THE PINCHOT INSTITUTE

Recognized as a leader in forest conservation thought, policy and action, the Pinchot Institute for Conservation was dedicated in 1963 by President John F. Kennedy, Jr. at Grey Towers National Historic Landmark (Milford, PA)—home of conservation leader Gifford Pinchot. The Institute is an independent nonprofit organization that works collaboratively with all Americans nationwide—from federal and state policymakers to citizens in rural communities—to strengthen forest conservation by advancing sustainable forest management, developing conservation leaders, and providing science-based solutions to emerging natural resource issues. Further information about the Pinchot Institute’s programs and activities can be found at www.pinchot.org.

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energy subsidies and hasten the introduction of renewable energy; 3) recognizing the right to safe drinking water as a basic human right backed by the investments needed to support such an initiative; 4) breathing additional life into biodiversity and desertification conventions, and launching an effort to frame country-specific (North-South) compacts to stem deforestation and protect threatened ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots; and 5) revamping global, environmental governance and providing new institutional means that provide norms and rules for globalization.

In May 2002, the Secretary-General issued a major statement based on the “need for greater clarity on what Johannesburg is about and what it can achieve.” He called for a “strong program of action” and identified specific areas where “concrete results are both essential and achievable.” Identified initiatives were to meet the clean water and sanitation needs of the poor; provide access to modern energy services to the two billion who now lack them; increase the use of renewables and energy efficiency; reverse the deterioration of agricultural lands and implement the Desertification Convention; protect biodiversity and marine fisheries; and safeguard human health from toxic chemicals and unsanitary conditions.

THE CURRENT REALITY

The outcomes of WSSD bear no resemblance to the specific, monitorable plans of action many of us were advocating during the Summit’s preparatory process. What emerged instead was either nothing or next to nothing (as in the cases, for example, of renewable energy, desertification, development assistance funding, governance, and globalization) or very general and non-binding targets with timetables for their accomplishment. Since the United States and many

others typically opposed these “targets and timetables,” they were viewed at WSSD as major accomplishments when positive outcomes were achieved regarding them. Among the more notable of these agreements were the following:

✿ “We agree to halve, by the year 2015,...the proportion of people who do not have access to basic sanitation;”

✿ We aim to achieve “by 2020 the chemicals that are used and produced in ways that lead to the minimization of significant, adverse effects on human health or the environment;”



✿ “The following actions are required at all levels: a) maintain or restore stocks [of fish] to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield, with the aim of achieving these goals for depleted stocks on an urgent basis and where possible, not later than 2015;”

✿ “The achievement, by 2010, of a significant reduction in the current loss rate of biological diversity that will require the provision of new, and additional, financial and technical resources to developing countries.”

Clearly, transforming these and the few other time-bound “commitments” in the WSSD Plan of Implementation into major initiatives in the

real world will require huge future efforts to move from these generalities to specific plans of action and to garner the necessary political and financial commitments. If this happens, we can look back at the battles at Johannesburg and see these provisions as the start of something important in these areas. It is also possible that these agreements will be ignored just as most of the agreements at Rio were. Unfortunately, the Plan of Implementation is silent on follow-up mechanisms for these agreements.

There are many other signs of how difficult it was for governments to move the agenda forward at Johannesburg. It was viewed as a single accomplishment to get the following sentence regarding climate change into the Plan of Implementation: “States that have ratified the Kyoto Protocol strongly urge states that have not already done so to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in a timely manner.” That was the Summit’s only fresh contribution to the most threatening of all environmental problems. Expanded reliance on fossil fuels is called for in numerous places without acknowledgement of climate risks.

Also, it was a struggle in the negotiations to achieve recognition of the Precautionary Principle adopted at Rio. Only a last minute appeal by Ethiopia managed to delete words that would have made environmental treaties subservient to World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. The governments also could not agree on language that would guide the WTO on implementing the Doha Agreement or on how to look at globalization from a sustainable development perspective. In the end many were musing that the day of the UN mega-conference may have passed.

PROMISING OUTCOMES

A more positive assessment of the Johannesburg outcomes is possible if one starts with low expectations and

the premise that WSSD was sailing against stiff winds from the outset. The world economy has seen better days. The U.S. Administration is preoccupied with Iraq and the war on terrorism and generally hostile to both environmental causes and multilateral agreements. (WSSD was originally scheduled to end on September 11.) The developing world is both wary of and frustrated with the rich countries. The failure to implement the Rio agreements casts a long shadow, raising questions about credibility and accountability in processes such as WSSD. Those who sought important outcomes at Johannesburg were aware of these and other negative factors, but hoped that the fundamental importance of the issues involved would drive the agenda.

From this perspective there are those who are relieved that what they see as a generally sensible, forward-looking document was agreed upon in the end. Essentially, they are thankful for modest accomplishments. The targets and timetables that were agreed to offer some hope. A number of parallel multilateral processes, including a large number of environmental treaties and trade agreements, got a modest boost in the Plan of Implementation, as did the Millennium Development Goals. The business community was deeply and generally positively involved, much more so than at Rio.

Most importantly, there was tremendous vitality, commitment and determination within the non-governmental organization (NGO) community and, indeed, with many participating governments and agencies. As a lowest common denominator document, the WSSD Plan of Implementation is hardly reflective of the best of our world.

PARTNERSHIP HIGHLIGHTS

WSSD pioneered the promotion of “type 2 outcomes,” public-private

and other partnership initiatives for sustainable development. Hundreds of these individual initiatives were showcased at Johannesburg. The United States highlighted numerous U.S.-based partnership initiatives, said to be worth \$2.4 billion over several years. (Because it offered so little else in the “type 1” negotiations, critics accused the United States of seeking to derail the main purpose of the meeting with them.) The U.N. Environment Programme presented awards for the 10 best partnerships, including Alcan, Inc., for school-based recycling in Asia and the Americas and Shell for a gas exploration project in the Philippines.



Brazil, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the World Bank and the World Wildlife Fund announced one especially promising partnership. Their Amazon Regional Protected Area project ensures that 500,000 square miles of the Amazon will be put under Federal protection. This is the largest ever tropical forest protection plan, an area twice the size of the United Kingdom, that will triple the amount that is already protected.

In another partnership of a very different sort, Greenpeace and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development joined forces for the first time to call upon governments “to tackle climate change on the basis of the Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol. Independently, Russia took the occasion of the Summit

to announce that it would ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

Several important initiatives announced at Johannesburg plant seeds for the future. The European Union announced that, having failed to win green energy targets at WSSD, it would seek to organize a “coalition of the willing,” like-minded countries to push ahead with global goals for renewable energy development. Germany’s Chancellor Schroeder announced that Germany was willing to host an international conference on renewables, saying that “climate change is no longer a skeptical prognosis, but a bitter reality.” Another group of “like-minded countries,” the 15 biologically richest or “mega-diverse” countries that are home to 70% of the planet’s biological diversity, have come together to achieve reductions in the rate of such loss, protect against biopiracy, and seek fairness and equity in sharing the economic benefits derived from biodiversity.

POSSIBLE SIGNIFICANCE

Writing immediately after the Johannesburg Summit, it is difficult to forecast its long-term significance. But some conclusions are possible. First, the WSSD was a true sustainable development summit in the sense that it advocates all three dimensions of sustainable development—the triple bottom line of economy, environment, and society—were there under one roof, arguing their cases, raising real-world issues, and confronting those with different interests and perspectives.

It was not a social summit dealing only with poverty, exclusion and human rights. It was not an economic and globalization summit addressing only trade and investment, finance for development, and transfer of technology. And it was not an environmental summit focusing only on large-scale biotic impoverishment and pollution. No, it was instead a summit

about the intersections of these issues and was as sprawling and unwieldy as the sustainable development concept itself. But, because of this, it accurately reflected the dynamics of these issues as they are in reality today. And every so often, the vision of sustainable development, actually becoming the unifying concept for its three powerful components, would appear like a quantum apparition, and thus shimmer for a moment, then fade away. Perhaps with more leadership, better preparation, and a more focused agenda, sustainable development could provide the meeting with the grounding it needed to resolve real-world issues of inevitable difficulty and complexity.

As it was, what Johannesburg revealed in bringing all this together was that our world is badly divided on many key issues: corporate accountability, globalization and the WTO, trade and subsidies, climate and energy, development priorities and aid, and many others. The Summit debates covered the core issue of making economic globalization supportive of sustainable development, raising many of the right issues, but in the end delegates could only agree on platitudes and on-the-one-hand/on-the-other-hand theories. That is a sad, but true, commentary on the state of international discourse. The warring paradigms depicted by Martin Khor were greatly evidenced, and next to nothing was accomplished to bridge this gap in perception and power. In all these senses, we are still worlds apart.

Johannesburg also underscored the poor condition we are in regarding the status of environmental issues and institutions. *The Economist* editorialized that “if the world had needed saving, it would have been wrong to expect an event such as the U.N. summit to rise to that challenge in the first place. Happily, though the world does not need saving...it is ludicrous to suggest that the earth is in grave peril.”

The sense of mounting alarm that many of us feel regarding the global environment was hard to find at Johannesburg outside NGO circles and a few governments. Wrongheaded though it be, *The Economist's* views do seem to capture a panglossian perspective that was widespread at Johannesburg. In a similar vein, serious questions about how to strengthen multilateral, environmental institutions and global, environmental governance generally were never on the table for discussion. The environmental community in and out of government has got its work cut out for it if it wants to provide a powerful pillar of sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

To conclude on a positive note, we should return to the most exciting and impressive aspect of the Johannesburg Summit—the outpouring of unscripted, bottom-up initiatives announced there, some official “type 2” initiatives and some not. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development has called these decentralized and improvisational commitments and partnerships “Jazz,” and while governments bicker, Jazz is fast becoming the most encouraging arena for action today, with an outpouring of initiatives from businesses, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and others, including the following:

✿ By 2010, seven large companies—DuPont, Shell, BP Amoco, and Alcan among them—have agreed to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to 15% below their 1990 levels. Alcoa is reported to be on track to reducing its emissions to 25% below 1990 levels in this time frame, and DuPont is on schedule to reduce emissions by 65% by 2010.

✿ Eleven major companies, including DuPont, General

Motors, and IBM, have formed the Green Power Market Development Group and have committed to developing markets for 1,000 megawatts of renewable energy over the next decade.

✿ Home Depot, Lowe's, Andersen, and others have agreed to sell wood (to the degree that it is available) from only sustainably managed forests that have been certified by an independent group against rigorous criteria. Unilever, the largest processor of fish in the world, has agreed to the same regarding fish products.

Nongovernmental organizations have played important roles in forging these corporate initiatives. In essence, they are the real maestros of Jazz. State and local governments, private foundations, universities, and other entities also have contributed. Through the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, more than 500 local governments are now part of a campaign to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Pew Center on Global Climate Change has identified 21 separate state initiatives to do the same. A serious question for us all is how to take Jazz to scale, and the Johannesburg Summit was a help in this regard. Only time will tell what happens, and how far we come, next.

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