



PROJECT MUSE®

World Summit on Sustainable Development: Toward a Post-Jo'Burg Environmentalism

Wapner, Paul Kevin.

Global Environmental Politics, Volume 3, Number 1, February 2003,
pp. 1-10 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/gep/summary/v003/3.1wapner.html>

World Summit on Sustainable Development: Toward a Post-Jo'burg Environmentalism

*Paul Wapner**

How should we think about the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) that took place this past summer in Johannesburg? Did it re-energize the international community's commitment to environmental protection and world development? Did it reshape global environmental and development affairs? Will it leave a legacy of thinking or action that will distinguish the post-Johannesburg era from earlier times? Or, alternatively, will it stand as simply another feeble attempt by the world community to address the collective challenges of environmental well-being and meaningful development?

At this point in time—only months after the Summit—it is certainly too early to tell. Rome wasn't built in a day; global environmental and development challenges aren't solved in a matter of months. If the WSSD made a difference, we probably won't know for some time and, during the waiting period, we will debate intensely about the measures to be used in ascertaining the Summit's legacy. Nonetheless, much took place in Johannesburg and, while we may not easily be able to assess success or failure at this point in time, we can nonetheless glean lessons about the nature of contemporary, global environmental politics from the event. We can use the WSSD, in other words, as a benchmark for gauging the character of world environmental affairs. The WSSD marked a few big changes in the way the world thinks about and acts toward environmental issues and coming to terms with these changes enables us to enter more mindfully into the post-Jo'burg era.

Into Jo'Burg

The WSSD took place ten years after the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which was held in Rio de Janeiro. The aim was not to introduce a new agenda or forge new treaties but 'simply' to

* I would like to thank the referee of this paper for valuable suggestions. I would also like to thank Simon Nicholson for his comments and feedback on an earlier version.

implement Rio. UNCED produced the Rio Declaration, the forty-chapter Agenda 21, treaties on Climate Change and Biological Diversity, and a non-binding statement on Forest Principles. While far from complete in themselves, these documents represented consensus understandings of key environmental threats and laid out initiatives to be taken in the service of sustainable development. Unfortunately, the documents remain mostly relics. Yes, they have inspired innovative policies in a number of countries and municipalities and, yes, they have helped generate widespread concern and appreciation for the joint challenges of economic development and environmental protection, and, in the case of the two treaties, yes, they have led to on-going negotiations. However, as even governments realized in planning the WSSD, also known as "Rio-plus-10," the world had not gone far enough in translating the documents into concrete actions. The WSSD was supposed to change that by reinvigorating the global community and forging concrete steps toward implementation of Rio's somewhat forgotten promises.

Over 100 heads of state and close to 25,000 governmental, business and activist organizations attended the Summit, along with countless ordinary citizens. Official proceedings took place at the Sandton Convention Centre, in one of the wealthiest parts of Johannesburg, while numerous side events, including many hosted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), occurred throughout the vast city. One of the most striking aspects about the Summit was the sheer size of the gathering. Many say that it was not simply the largest UN conference but, quite likely, the largest meeting ever held in the world. Streams of people walked the halls, protested on the streets and spoke out at multiple fora throughout the two-week event. At times, sadly, it seemed like most people came more to say their piece than to listen, learn or dialogue with each other. In plenary sessions, governmental ministers made prepared statements that were largely unrelated to the specific topics at hand. NGOs held panels that often failed to speak to each other or generate a larger vision for the future of environmental protection and world development. Even ordinary observers appeared lost in the shuffle as they shuttled frenetically from one event to another, hoping to catch a well-known speaker or see a dazzling exhibit. As should be expected at any such gathering, there was little time to absorb what was being said. Indeed, one got the sense that, while many words were being spoken, few were listening.

The WSSD suffered not only from its size and the cacophony of voices but from a pervasive feeling of conference fatigue. The United Nations has been holding major, world conferences almost every year on everything from health, population, women and social welfare to children, AIDS, and human rights. The WSSD came, for many, as an obligation. Plenty of governments felt dragged into the exercise as did, ironically, many activist groups. As an anniversary conference, "Rio-plus-10" stood initially as an event in search of a purpose. Like Earth Day held each year, many knew *why* it was taking place although they were unsure about *what* it was supposed to accomplish. One observer noted that gov-

ernments came to Johannesburg to negotiate for negotiation's sake and, one could add, many NGOs attended simply to attend. It can't be forgotten, of course, that the WSSD took place in the shadow of the September 11 attacks and thus much of the world was distracted. Moreover, given that the mandate of the Summit was to implement what the world had, so far, been unable to implement, it is no surprise that the Summit failed to generate the hoped-for levels of enthusiasm. For many, the WSSD seemed like a lingering project of a bygone era for a distracted world rather than an opportunity to create healthier, more just and more ecologically-sound lives for the 21st century.

Miraculously, the WSSD went forward despite these challenges and produced some immediate, noteworthy achievements. The Summit generated two, key documents: the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and the Plan of Implementation. The first spells out the multiple but connected challenges associated with sustainable development and specifies a number of general commitments such as the promotion of women's empowerment and greater democratic participation in sustainable development policies. As would be expected, the Declaration is more hortatory than promissory.

The Plan of Implementation is a longer document that identifies a number of overall goals such as eradicating poverty, changing consumption and production patterns, and protecting the earth's natural resource base. Additionally it specifies distinct commitments. The most impressive of these revolve around five priority areas—water, energy, health, agriculture and biological diversity. So, for example, there are commitments to reduce the loss of biological diversity by 2010, halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015, restore world fish stocks by 2015, and promote the production of chemicals that are harmless to human health and the environment by 2020. Few could disagree about the importance of such commitments and timetables. The problem is that governments gave little indication of how they would reach these goals and thus left them largely at the level of ambiguous, unenforceable promises.

For many, WSSD's key contribution was to establish close to 300 partnerships—between governments, industry and NGOs—to carry out some of these general aims. The partnerships seek to translate overall principles into on-the-ground actions. Medical schools in the North, for example, initiated links with physicians and social programs in the developing world to establish ongoing, public health programs. Likewise, the South African government is working with NGOs and private computer services to calculate and set-up compensatory actions that can be taken to off-set carbon emissions generated by the WSSD meeting itself. The hope for these partnerships is to harness and integrate the economic incentives of the private sector, the on-the-ground experience of NGOs, the passions of ordinary citizens and the coordinating capabilities of governments to address specific challenges of sustainable development. These partnerships are so important that, according to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the ability of the international community to follow-through on them

will provide a key measure of the success of the WSSD. It is important to point out, however, that, notwithstanding their promise, so far the number and magnitude of the partnerships proposed seem minuscule to the tasks at hand. Moreover, many worry that excessive reliance on the private sector will convert public-spirited initiatives into merely commercial endeavors. Indeed, the WSSD's embrace of the private sector to spearhead partnerships has led many critics to refer to the Summit as "Rio-minus-10."

Unpacking the WSSD Dialogue: The Abandonment of Old Principles

Whatever the ultimate fate of WSSD's documents and partnerships, the dynamics of how governments arrived at these commitments and the larger frames within which the discussions took place shed light on the emerging era of global environmental politics. This new era is marked by the abandonment of two guiding principles that have been at work in world environmental affairs since at least Rio and probably much before then. Recognizing their absence at the WSSD goes a long way toward reorienting ourselves to the post-Jo'burg age.

South and North Swap Interests on Environment and Development

The first principle is that the North cares only about the environment while the South worries solely about development. For a long time, this was largely the case. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) was held in Stockholm with little participation from Southern governments. It was seen as an environment conference focused primarily on the pollution problems of the North with little consequence for Southern countries. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development tried to expand the meaning of environmental protection to include Southern concerns by focusing on development through popularizing the notion of 'sustainable development' in their report, *Our Common Future*. The Commission defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This statement aimed, in part, to reorient development practices so that they would take into account long-term environmental protection. The problem with the concept of sustainable development, as it was initially conceived, however, is that, while it articulated a lofty goal and saw clearly the connections between economic and environmental well-being, the world was still split in terms of immediate interests. The South largely looked to the term as a formal commitment to address development goals, while many in the North looked to it as an affirmation of global environmental protection efforts. This divide has informed many North-South negotiations ever since.

One saw this divide at Rio. Leading up to UNCED, government officials tried to produce an Earth Charter that would articulate, in concise language, a world commitment to sustainable development. (The Charter was eventually

downgraded to a declaration appropriately titled, the “Rio Declaration.”) In one of the preparatory sessions, a delegate from the North and one from the South were discussing the form of the Charter. The Northern delegate offered that the Charter should be a short, poetic statement that could be reproduced on posters and hung on the walls of children’s bedrooms throughout the world as a message of inspiration. While proffered as a genuine suggestion, the delegate from the South expressed disappointment. The Southern delegate responded that most children in the South do not have their own bedrooms and many of them are unable to read. While simply one exchange among many, the interaction encapsulated in broad form the environment/development divide. At Rio, Northern delegates were primarily going to an environmental conference while Southern ones were attending a development one. Sustainable development, for all its conceptual insight, failed to bring the two sides together. Since Rio, much effort has gone toward better defining sustainable development and exploring practical applications that can meld the dual interests. While admirable and important, the going has been, predictably, rough.

The WSSD indicated that this effort, despite its inability to advance the theory and practice of sustainable development far beyond Rio, now needs to be rethought because the two sides no longer subscribe to their traditional positions. Documents produced by the South and statements by Southern delegates made at the Summit indicate that much of the South is increasingly concerned with environmental issues. Indeed, one heard a growing recognition on the part of many from the South that ecological protection is the grounding for economic well-being and development. After years of seeing the environment primarily as a luxury that the poor could ill afford, many Southern governments have now picked up on the lead of their citizens in seeing the environment as the essential resource base on which economic life depends. Water, forests, soil and wildlife provide the fundamental means of life for the poor. These cannot be squandered or otherwise degraded without severe implications. Put differently, many (but certainly not all) Southern governments have recognized the intimate relationship between healthy rivers, abundant firewood, usable manure and the economic viability of the poor. This has made them much more attuned to environmental issues. Given this, one can now say that, just like the North is no longer able to conceive of environmental protection devoid of development, the South is no longer able to ignore development’s environmental dimensions.

When it comes to the North in this equation, things look quite different. After leading the charge for years to take environmental issues seriously, many Northern governments are now increasingly letting these concerns fall by the wayside in favor of, ironically, economic development—only now, such development is of a particular type and to be generated by specific strategies. This is especially the case with regard to the United States and a number of its closest allies. At the WSSD powerful voices from the North came out clearly in support of economic globalization. These governments made sure that the Johannes-

burg Declaration and the Plan of Implementation did not contradict or otherwise undermine world trade agreements, and even suggested that the world look to such agreements as mechanisms for achieving the goals of the Summit. Put differently, the US and a number of other Northern governments proposed economic globalization as the answer to the world's environmental and development challenges. They argued that further opening-up of markets, lowering tariffs, privatizing public land and holdings, and so forth would improve the lot of the poor and, at the same time, improve environmental conditions. This, of course, is not surprising given that many in the North see economic globalization as the answer to *all* challenges. Now, it may, indeed, be the case that trade liberalization and related actions *will* enhance the prospects for environmental production and world development. (Such a proposition is open for debate.) However, it is important to note the shift of attention. Historically, the most powerful nations of the North put environmental concerns front and center at international conferences that focused on development and environment. Now, economic globalization is key. As we reorient ourselves to the post-Jo'burg age, we must keep this in mind.

Environmentalism meets the Environment (at the Bottom of the Priority List)

The second guiding principle absent in Johannesburg has to do with the way most of us see the effectiveness of global environmental protection efforts. Despite the seemingly small steps taken at the WSSD, the world can be quite proud of the number of international environmental agreements on record, the institutions that now exist aimed at global environmental protection and the widespread subscription to environmental values. There are close to 500 international environmental agreements, a host of organizations at the global level coordinating environmental activities, and environmental consciousness has been mainstreamed into cultures the world over. If we take these together, we could say that environmentalism—the array of institutions and attention paid to environment—is doing quite well these days. There certainly seems to be a critical mass of concern and institution-building devoted to global environmental issues.

Critics have often pointed out, however, that, while *environmentalism* may be doing well, the *environment* is not. That is, critics constantly claim that the institutional capacity at the world level, while impressive, has been largely unable to address the enormity and intensity posed by global environmental threats. Yes, there are many agreements and institutions, and, yes, many people now care about environmental concerns. But these have not translated, on the whole, into measurable, systematic, effectual action at the global level. Critics point out, in other words, that there is a disconnect between concern and policy on behalf of the environment, on the one hand, and the biophysical quality of the earth's ecosystem, on the other.

Their judgment is borne out by the historical record. Since Rio, despite impressive texts, new and improved institutions, and the ever-widening dissemination of environmental values, widespread environmental degradation continues almost unabated. Species extinction and habitat destruction have increased, degradation of soils around the world has worsened, over-fishing has intensified and global carbon emissions have grown significantly since 1992. One could add to this a litany of disappointments having to do with water and air quality, the introduction of hazardous chemicals, as well as increases in desertification and water scarcity throughout many parts of the world. This is not to say, of course, that there have been no bright spots. Two notable achievements have been bringing more land under environmental protection and decreasing the amount of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) production. But these successes are the exception. The strains on the earth's sources, sinks and sites have intensified dramatically since Rio and show no sign of decreasing in the near future.

The disconnect between environmentalism and environmental quality is well-known and firmly part of conventional environmental wisdom. Critics have long pointed out the discrepancy and it has often set the agenda of much of the environmental movement. That is, many have worked to increase the effectiveness of international environmental governance and make good on the widespread enthusiasm for environmental protection. They have believed that the tide of history was with them and that the mainstreaming of environmentalism would eventually express itself in genuine environmental protection and improvement. The key was simply closing the gap between environmentalism and the environment.

While closing the gap has been a key strategy of the environmental movement for a long time, it must now be reevaluated. Given what happened at the WSSD, it now seems that one can no longer count on environmentalism to hold its own to induce change. In other words, environmentalism, as a reliable public sensibility, is itself in trouble. There are multiple reasons for this.

First, the world is still distracted by the attacks of September 11th and the subsequent global attention directed at terrorism and events in Iraq and the Middle East more generally. In the midst of such concerns, the world sees sustainable development as mere low politics at a time of seemingly more immediate security concerns. This bodes ill for environmentalism.

Second, and related, the hegemon has essentially checked out of the business of global environmental protection. After largely leading the international community on environmental issues for many years, the United States has lost interest in, or has seen its own national interest opposed to, collective environmental well-being. President George W. Bush refused to go to the Summit despite the presence of 100 other heads of state. Moreover, his administration has pulled the US signature from the Kyoto Protocol, attempted to disavow agreements negotiated at the Cairo Summit on population, weakened many

domestic environmental regulations that articulate with global ones and taken extensive steps to deepen global investments in the fossil fuel economy rather than seeking alternative energy sources that would impose less harm on the environment. Add to this a reduction in US foreign aid since Rio and one sees a picture of hegemonic disengagement.

Third, while the international community has created an extensive system of international environmental regimes, this system has been largely trumped by trade agreements. As mentioned, the North worked hard at the Summit to ensure that new agreements did not undermine existing trade regimes and would not hamper future trade agreements. This was part of a broader, more sustained strategy of advancing economic globalization. Such demands were not difficult to achieve given the long-standing imbalance between the amount of power given to trade regimes and the amount given to environmental ones. The world community endows the former with much more specificity and enforceability than the latter—as evidenced, for example, by the 26,000-page final document of the Uruguay Round that led to the World Trade Organization compared to the mere 273-page Agenda 21 which is supposed to serve as the central document for addressing global environmental challenges. Given the greater weight behind trade issues over environmental ones, it is no surprise that environmentalism is having a harder time expressing itself.

The last, and related, problem has to do with the meager amount of support the world community gives to those environmental institutions it sets up. Too often, it under-funds international environmental organizations or otherwise clips their institutional capacity. The budget of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is roughly US\$100 million. This is much less than the amount many individual countries spend on their own environmental efforts and substantially less than the yearly assets of the larger transnational corporations whose behavior UNEP must partially worry about. Additionally, the secretariats of many environmental treaties, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and the Montreal Protocol, are under-staffed and have only circumscribed powers.

Taken together, these phenomena suggest that the mismatch between environmentalism and environmental quality is no longer a problem. Environmentalism now joins the environment as being in difficult shape.

New Guiding Principles for a Post-Jo'Burg World

How does one move ahead in the new world of the post-Jo'burg era? How does one make sense of these changes and therewith fashion meaningful environmental efforts? Is it possible to grab the attention of a busy, distracted world and direct it toward environmental and development concerns given the shifting concerns of the North and the South and the flagging power of environmentalism? There are, of course, no easy answers to these questions. By way of conclusion, however, let me nonetheless suggest a new way of thinking about

environmental and development challenges that may address, in a broad fashion, some of the challenges of the post-Jo'burg world.

One of the greatest achievements of environmentalism over the years has been its expanding mandate. In its early years, environmentalism was concerned with so-called 'green issues.' It focused on the nonhuman world and attempted to protect its ecological integrity. It concentrated on wildlife, stunning landscapes, resource scarcity and pollution. In doing so, it largely ignored the immediate plight of people, especially the poor, because it assumed that either other movements were concentrating on social issues and thus it did not have to, or that human well-being would automatically be improved if environmental quality went up. Over the years, environmentalists recognized the folly of this orientation and started to consider the so-called 'brown issues' of urban areas and the challenges of poverty, social justice and economic well-being. They started to see that environmental protection was inextricably linked to broader efforts at social improvement and that without the latter, the former was merely a dream.

While this insight has been crucial to environmentalism, it may also be a liability in terms of achieving real environmental protection. There is no question that environmental degradation is associated with social impoverishment at every level of concern. Moreover, there are certainly actual projects that can address the interlocking goals of development, social justice and environmental protection. But it makes sense to ask ourselves whether the broad aim of sustainable development is something that environmentalism can afford to be strapped with. This question was raised at the WSSD by Daniel Esty of Yale University and a member of the US delegation to the Summit. He suggested that sustainable development might be a great vision but an untenable policy orientation. That is, sustainable development makes sense as an aspiration and as an ultimate destination for policy. But, as a criterion for all practical policy, it may be too much.

If you think about sustainable development long enough, you begin to see how it includes the challenges of the entire world. How do you get genuine sustainable development? Most observers claim that ultimately it involves revamping the world to establish good governance, ensure human rights, eradicate poverty, wipe out war, enable economic well-being, allow the expression of the world's diverse identities and safeguard the ecological foundations that makes life possible. Small measure? It is no mistake, then, that global environmental efforts *increasingly* fail to address their objectives because the scope of those objectives continually grow. To put the matter differently, environmentalism might have too much on its plate right now. It may be unable to respond dramatically (or even incrementally) because it is stuck with the challenge of not being able to do *anything* unless it does *everything*. This may be as it should be at the abstract and conceptual level. It can be damning at the pragmatic one.

Al Gore, in his book, *Earth in the Balance*, likened environmental degradation to a slow-motion nuclear war. Over the years, it has become clear that this

war does not stand alone but is fueled by much injustice, under-development, bad governance, violent conflict and so on. Notwithstanding the contribution of these factors, it must be clear that they matter most significantly when they align themselves with the main engines of environmental degradation: wasteful and unmindful affluence, inappropriate technology, accelerated population growth and worldviews that see nature as a realm separate from human life to be forever exploited in the name of satisfying human desires. Environmentalism has always focused on *these* engines and has achieved a number of impressive accomplishments in the process. It has yet, however, to come fully to terms with them. Such focus and effort must, nevertheless, continue.

To counsel such focus is not to say, however, that we should stop working on the other elements of the challenge. We must continue to work to eradicate poverty and injustice, facilitate meaningful development, prevent war and the host of other factors that contribute to environmental degradation. Rather, it simply means that environmentalism may do best when it is focused on a few pieces of the overall challenge rather than the challenge in its entirety (and other campaigns may do well similarly focusing on a few pieces). If we are ever going to make significant headway toward solving the world's many problems it will be by recognizing the connections between them first *and then* getting down to the business of addressing them in parts. The sum of the parts is often greater than the whole.

References

- Gore, Al. 1993. *Earth in the Balance*. New York: Plume.
- World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987. *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.